

# Coming to Terms with the Past: New Bulgarian Cinema and the Post-Communist Transition

by

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## Declaration of inclusion of published work

This thesis contains no material derived from a prior work and has not been submitted for examination at another institution. The thesis is the candidate's own work.

Part of Chapter 4, 'Chapter 4 Mediating and negotiating national identity in new Bulgarian cinema after 1989', has been accepted for publication in *New Diversities*, *Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity*, forthcoming.

## Abstract

Title: Coming to Terms with the Past: New Bulgarian Cinema and the Post-Communist Transition

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Media Studies.

In 1989, Bulgaria started its long and complicated process of a post-communist transition. The subsequent economic, social, and political instability, accompanied by a delayed and limited process of decommunisation, shaped a fragmented and polarised narrative about the past. In the context of the lack of official response to this polarisation, several vernacular modes of remembering become more and more significant. Post-communist transition remains an important theme in the new Bulgarian cinema, manifesting the need to discuss and evaluate the legacies of the past. This thesis proposes a multimethod approach to media memory studies, combining textual and contextual film analysis, focus groups with the audience, and interviews with the filmmakers.

The thesis begins by evaluating the role of cinema in challenging the East/West binary in the context of the re-evaluation of national identity triggered by the collapse of the communist regime and fuelled further by the accession of Bulgaria to the EU in 2007. The findings show that cinema emerges as a starting point that encourages dialogue about some specific areas of collective memory contestation. The multiplicity of the conflicting interpretations of the communist past is studied through the lens of the co-existence of the discourses of continuity and disruption. Finally, the thesis evaluates the enabling potential of post-communist nostalgia as a critique of the present. It is argued that cinema in Bulgaria emerges as a platform for negotiation encouraging a more nuanced public dialogue about the communist past and the transition.

Keywords: collective memory, mediated memory, national cinema, post-communist transition, mediated nostalgia, post-communist nostalgia, Bulgarian cinema, post-communist cinema

## Introduction

The collapse of communism in the 1980s-90s and the subsequent problematic transition from one social system to another contributed to the anxiety and cultural shock both in Eastern and Western European countries. Even though there have been numerous studies on the post-communist legacy in Europe, the constant presence of the traumatic events of the past in contemporary Bulgarian cinema is yet to be evaluated.

Several recent studies look at some aspects of post-1989 Bulgarian cinema, including comedy in the Bulgarian feature film (Hristova, 2017), marketing in the new Bulgarian cinema industry (Nedyalkova, 2014), and Bulgarian national cinema (Trifonova, 2014). However, the field of historical representations of the transition in Bulgarian cinema remains relatively unexplored with only a few studies focusing on the effect of the transition on the film industry and cinematic representations (Stojanova, 2006; Trifonova, 2006). At the same time, the topic of the transition has a consistent presence in the new Bulgarian cinema (Dimitrova, 2009; NewMedia21, 2014), which signifies the need for new systemic studies of this phenomenon. The current research intends to fill this gap, as well as to increase the visibility of contemporary Bulgarian cinema in the European context.

This thesis explores the role that cinema plays in mediating collective memories about the events of 1989 and the consequent transition, which is particularly important in the context of the lack of official response and inconsistent lustration policies, and yet the consistent use of contested memories about the fall of communism in the current political scene in Bulgaria (Vukov, 2008).

This study argues that collective memory is a product of negotiation between at least four structures – media, memory consumers, memory makers and the historical context of memory contestation in Bulgaria. Thus, in order to study collective memory, we need to distinguish the conflict points of the contested memories, or, in other words, the counter-memories about the events of 1989 and *prehoda*. This leads to an understanding of collective memory as space where contested memories meet and where collective memory is seen as a result of a negotiation, or a ‘conversational process within which individuals locate themselves’ (Eyerman, 2001: 7).

Seeing collective memory as a symbolic space for a constant negotiation of contested memories is central to this study. Cinema is viewed as a place that can effectively illustrate the process of collective memory construction through mediating conversational practices and constructing visual representations, while the memory is also seen as an 'explanatory device that links representation and social experience' (Confino, 1997: 186).

This thesis sees collective memory about the events of 1989 as a) mediated by cinematic representations in the new Bulgarian cinema and b) articulated through contested or counter-memories. Thus, in order to evaluate the different patterns of collective remembering and identify the contested memories, we need to focus on the controversial and conflicting memories that have a destabilising effect but are also facilitating discussions and helping to establish a dialogue through a negotiation. This focus could help evaluate the role that cinema plays in mediating collective memory. As it was already mentioned before, the two main areas of interest include the discourses of national identity and evaluation of and coming to terms with the past. It should be noted that these two sections constantly intersect and interact.

Thus, the primary aim of this study is to examine the role of new Bulgarian cinema in shaping collective memories and coming to terms with the past during and after the fall of the communist regime. The more specific objectives are to study the contested representations and perceptions of the past and present after 1989, as well as the contested versions of the Bulgarian national identity mediated by cinema. It is hypothesised that cinema has the potential to trigger a meaningful engagement with the past by providing a public space for dialogue and negotiation. The thesis seeks to answer the following research questions: what contested versions of a transitional national belonging are present in cinema and how are they triggering the process of an intercultural dialogue; what are the contested collective memories of the post-1989 transition and its aftermath and how are they mediated by cinema and, finally, what is the potential of cinema as a platform for initiating a dialogue that could help with coming to terms with the past.

This study is also an attempt to overcome some of the shortcomings of the existent memory studies methodologies, such as the lack of audience studies and conceptual clarity. I aim to meet the need for more interdisciplinarity by using a multimethod approach to collective memory studies (Kansteiner, 2008; Confino,

2006). This approach includes a combination of three qualitative methods – textual and contextual film analysis, focus groups with the audience, and interviews with the filmmakers.

### Ontology and Epistemology

There is still a state of uncertainty that affects the political, social and cultural life in Bulgaria, suggesting that the transition is still in progress. In the context of an absence of official response to this traumatic state of events and public anxiety about it, the collective memory about the events of the transition is still fractured and fragmented, as the transition in Bulgaria is often labelled as ‘failed’ or ‘delayed’ (see Minchev, 2013; Dobrinsky, 2000; Dimitrov, 2001; Open Democracy, 2013; Debating Europe, 2015).

This study looks at new Bulgarian cinema as one of the possible platforms that could encourage dialogue and debate about the conflicting images of the past. The combination of film analysis, interviews, and focus groups is used to evaluate to what extent cinema could help induce a dialogue and provide a space for negotiating different versions of the past both for the filmmakers and the audience. This approach also allows for exploring the various ways of engagement with history and national identity mediated by cinema in post-1989 Bulgaria.

In this study, cinema is seen as both a product of collective memory and a tool for shaping it. Therefore, it is essential to view the negotiation of memory as an ongoing process of constant interaction between the historical context, the memory makers and memory consumers (Kansteiner, 2002). This study employs a theoretical framework based on politics of remembering theory (Molden, 2016) and social constructivism to order to evaluate the potential of the contested memories and their role in the distribution of power in constructing collective memory about the 1989. This research also deals with an analysis of the hegemonic versions of history in new Bulgarian cinema, looking at the contested memories and the subversive potential in their critique of various power relationships.



## Theoretical Concepts

### **Transitology and *prehoda***

The gradual decline of communism in 1980-90s resulted in a drastic change both in the public and private spheres of the life of many Europeans. Newly created or restored states, along with the transformed ideologies and various interpretations of history, once again brought up the issues of national identity. At the same time, collective memory developed as a cultural mechanism for processing the past and serving as a counterpoint to the master narrative of history.

Transitology itself emerged in social and political science as a study of transitions from one political regime to another, mainly from an authoritarian regime to a democracy. The term is often used when describing the development of post-Soviet countries and the former Eastern bloc countries after 1989. Transitology as a field of studies is a somewhat controversial one, as some scholars express concerns about the generalisations and Eurocentric tendencies of transitology (Bunce, 1995). However, others believe that transitology has not lost its topicality in the last decade, calling for the need of a reconceptualization of the discipline to analyse the recent events of the Arab Spring (Mohamedou and Sisk, 2013) and the further development of the post-socialist countries in the European Union (Jankauskas & Gudžinskas, 2008). The present study remains sensitive to the problematic implications of the 'catching up' discourse (Buden, 2018; Tlostanova 2010) and transitology as a research area.

The term '*prehoda*' ('*пpexoдa*', the letter 'a' at the end is a definite article) is widely used in Bulgarian, both in the media and scholarship, to describe the transition from communism to democracy after 1989. The Bulgarian language dictionary gives the following definitions of the word:

Pl. *prehodi*, (two) *prehoda*, m.

1. Only singular. A passage from one condition to another. A continuous (slow) transition.
2. Transportation from one place to another. Tourist (camping) trip (2008).

This definition provides an interesting insight into the connotations of the transition as a slow, continuous process, that is also considered quite tiresome and difficult. It is important to note that the same word is often used to describe a mountain pass or a long and difficult journey to cross a mountain in order to reach your destination (*'goren prehoda'*). These nuances of the word support my argument about the essence of the transition in Bulgaria as a slow and problematic process without clear deadlines in the foreseeable future. Since the term 'transition' does not communicate the same meaning as *'prehoda'*, the former will be used to refer to more general processes of post-1989 changes in Eastern Europe, while the Bulgarian word will be used to describe the specific Bulgarian context.

### **Collective memory and media memory**

It is unarguable that memory studies have been experiencing a rise in interest or a 'memory boom' (Olick, 2002: 8) in the past few decades. One of the most popular explanations for this are the changing historical narratives after the two world wars when the modernist narratives of progress could no longer explain the shocking, often illogical events of the wartime. Trying to make sense of history and its traumatic events, nation-states turned to the past as a 'repository of inspiration for repressed identities and unfulfilled claims' (Olick, 2002: 8). In other words, collective memory became a source of new national identities in a world, where traditional social connections were no longer that obvious.

Another indisputable cause of memory studies expansion is the need for processing the traumatic events of the Holocaust, addressed, for instance, by Arendt in her study of the 'banality of evil' (1962). Later, Nora developed a critique of memory sites in Germany, accentuating the important role of Holocaust studies in the development of memory studies and the 'memory boom' (1989). At the same time, it is vital to consider other important causes of the 'memory boom' rooted in the technology development and commodification of nostalgia (explored by Jameson, 1991; Landsberg, 2013; Boym, 2001). The idea of the overwhelming speed of life and fear of amnesia became central in studies across different disciplines. Huyssen explains the 'memory boom' as an attempt to 'claim some anchoring space in a world of puzzling and often threatening homogeneity, non-synchronicity, and information overload' (1995: 7).

Even though memory studies existed before the 'boom', there is one obvious feature of the recent 'memory boom' studies in comparison with the earlier studies – an understanding of memory as a social construct embedded in the social frameworks, influenced and shaped by specific political contexts, and enabled by a combination of cultural institutions (museums and memorials) and new media technologies (Olick, 2011: 37). As frameworks and circumstances change with time, the discourse of memory studies changes accordingly. Thus, memory studies as an academic field has to be continuously re-connected to the present discourse and re-evaluated in the present context. In other words, the context is the crucial point for the whole field, and the importance of classic memory studies is defined by its ability to reflect the present and interact with it effectively. Therefore, the selection of studies for this review is determined by the needs of a particular space and time of the research subject, namely the problematic events of 1989 in Bulgaria and their influence on contemporary Bulgarian cinema.

Although Halbwachs was not the only or the earliest researcher to comment on collective memory, his theoretical contribution to the field is crucial for this research. In his landmark work, Halbwachs defines collective memory as a collectively created space where people with a common ground share common memories and live in the present moment characterised by certain circumstances (1925). Hence, in this definition collective memory is always affected by the present, as it is always being constructed in the present moment. Memories, therefore, are not stable and reliable reflections of past events – they are continuously being shaped and re-shaped. The collective space where memories are being constructed is influenced by the current political, social and cultural situation, which in turn is constantly changing the way we remember the past. Since the very process of remembering is always situated in the present, memories need to stay meaningful and relevant, which is why they are constantly adjusting to the context of the present. As Jan Assmann notes: 'The past is not simply "received" by the present. The present is "haunted" by the past and the past is modelled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present' (1998: 9).

Some scholars explain the contemporary obsession with historical events as a way to recall the events that are inevitably slipping away from our memory, overcoming our inability to store significant amounts of data. As Nora argued, 'we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left' (1989: 7), which creates

a need to create *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) 'because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory' (1989: 7). Such sites of memory exist in order to create a material space for the preservation of collective memory, for sharing in and for experiencing it. Alternatively, as Jameson (1991) argues, people nowadays are becoming unable to organise a coherent narrative (hence, create History) about their present and, therefore, are doomed to turn to the events of the past in the form of nostalgia all over again. Within this postmodernist approach to history, collective memory appears to be a means of effective remembering of historical events in the late capitalist society, as the classic notion of history has lost its linear, objective, hegemonic meaning in the era of a fast life. Instead, the absolutism of history (and the historians as history gatekeepers) is being replaced by multiple stories and alternative realities, facilitated by new technology. Apart from always being closely related to the present moment, collective memories are also characterised as 'shared' or created in cooperation. Kuhn stresses the social, collective essence of any act of remembering, arguing that 'remembering is institutionalised through cultural means – in objects, material culture (monuments, books, and suchlike)' (2010: 301).

Since personal memories are fragmented, Halbwachs (1925) sees the solution to the fragmented memory in the social sphere: lacking parts of the memories' mosaic can be compensated for and supplemented with the memories of other community members. Furthermore, a more radical approach suggests that the things we only see in the media are being incorporated in our memory and, therefore, stored as our memories, even though we are not witnessing them (Landsberg, 2004). Thus, collective memory exists in the social sphere in mnemonic artefacts, such as memorials, museums, statues, archives, as well as in the form of visual and digital media, such as films, documentaries, photos, newspapers, social networks, and blogs.

The notion of collective memory as a prosthetic tool (Landsberg, 2004), to some extent, oversimplifies collective memory, seeing it more as a static 'storage unit' for personal memories. A more dialectic approach suggests a model where personal and collective memories are constantly interacting or filling each other's gaps of knowledge. Radstone (2010), for instance, suggests that memory becomes more visible or problematic at certain critical moments, taking up the role of balancing and making sense of the ambivalent events in times of a crisis. Olick's work on collective

memory played a major part in exploring the continuous, dynamic aspect of memory (Olick, 1999). Avoiding instrumentalist and functionalist approaches to memory, he argues that collective memory is an ongoing process of meaning-making and meaning-interchanging. Olick's theory of collected (aggregated individual memories) and collective memories (collective memory as an entity) is vital for this study, as it gives a clear idea of what links personal experience and mediated remembering through culture.

It can be argued that film is particularly powerful in creating spaces of collective remembering, as a way of mediating memories since it is 'peculiarly capable of bringing together personal experiences and larger systems and processes of cultural memory' (Kuhn, 2010: 304). Media memory is an important notion regarding conceptualising the mediation of history, viewing media 'not merely as a channel or process but rather as a phenomenon in itself' (Meyers, Neiger, Zandberg, 2011: 14). Media memory explores the collective past narrated by the media and through the media, answering a whole range of questions. These questions vary from analysing media as a memory agent, exploring cultures where these processes occur, and studying the interaction between media and socio-political factors.

It could be generalised that media memory studies are focused on two main research fields: agency and context (Meyers, Neiger, Zandberg, 2011). The field of *agency* in media memory studies tackles the aspects of media capability to shape and reshape collective memory and national identity. This area is focused on the impact of media on agenda-setting and attributing particular significance to certain historical events (Edgerton & Rollins, 2001; Zandberg, 2010, Zelizer, 1992). Another aspect of agency is the question of borders, or how the media memories shape national identities in terms of their boundaries (Anderson, 1991; Bellah, 1963; Hobsbawn, 1987).

One of the principal subjects of study under the domain of agency is the interaction of private and public memory, evaluating to what extent shared memories are becoming collective ones. Authenticity and the individual essence of memory are no longer a constant in memory studies, as scholars stress the major role of the media in filling the memory gaps and creating common spaces of remembering events that were not experienced individually. However, this vital role of the media can also be dangerous, as it has the power to distort old memories and even create new ones. Some recent works on this topic belong to Hoskins (2009) and his study

of 'flashbulb memories' in relation to media coverage (very vivid 'snapshots' brought up by media images about some events), as well as studies on the role of media as an 'external' memory storage unit by Nora ('prosthesis-memory') (1989) and Landsberg ('prosthetic memory') (2004). The present study offers a further exploration of the interplay between the private and public memory as a process mediated and stimulated by the common experience of cinematic representations.

Studies of media memory contexts are another major domain in media memory research, which covers questions of the circumstances (exploring the ways that present perceptions influence the visions of the past and vice versa) and questions of venues/outlets (analysis of the media itself, and the way that the media as a channel influences memory construction) (Olick, 2002). The present study combines both aspects aiming at bridging the gap between the two approaches, evaluating both the context of cinema production and industry and the role of cinema in the process of coming to terms with the past.

It is important to note that, although memory studies have been rapidly developing in the last few decades, some areas continue to be less explored. Among them are studies of the audience and the role of the media in mediating memories. To some extent, this lack could be explained by the complexity of the terms 'nostalgia' and 'memory', and the ambiguous understanding of these categories among potential participants. However, some studies in the area, including a study on the collective knowledge about public events in Soviet times by Schuman and his colleagues (2004: 2006), and research on media-related childhood memories in diverse cultures by Volkmer (2006), seem to be working effectively despite these limitations by looking at the various contextual factors impacting the ways that people remember the past. One of the aims of the present research is to address this gap in memory studies by conducting focus groups, where film extracts are used as starting points for negotiation of collective memory through a dialogue between the participants. Audience research in the form of focus groups not only provides some insight into the specific ways in which the audience interact and engage with historical representations on screen but also helps evaluate the role of cinema as a collective memory mediator.

### **Nostalgia: approaches**

The generalised definition that remains unchanged in its multiple variations

states that nostalgia is a sentimental longing for the past, linked to the present and facilitated by the social, economic, political and cultural shortcomings of the present (Asseel Al-Ragam, 2015: 2).

Until recently, the dominant tendency in academic studies was to condemn nostalgia as a regressive perception of the past. As Cashman notes, particularly in the 1980s and early 1990s, there has been a tendency to view nostalgia sceptically as a symptom of conservative and even reactionary views (2006: 137). Nora (1989), for example, famously stated that due to the fast pace of the modern times and anxiety induced by radical and rapid changes, memory has been permanently 'seized by history' (1989: 13), and transformed into the so-called *Lieux de Mémoire* where artificial nostalgic artefacts replace actual memories. Jameson also expressed a concern that nostalgia emerges as a result of the ahistorical condition, manifested as an inability to relate to the past critically and signifying the total amnesia of late capitalist society (1991). Alternatively, Pickering and Keightley suggest that an upsurge in the public's interest in the past manifests the opposite of amnesia and can be seen as 'an expression of the fear of social amnesia' (2006: 923). I would agree with the latter view, especially in the Bulgarian case, where it is probable that the lack of official narratives surrounding the past has led to social anxiety and some level of fear of forgetting or devaluing it.

Emphasizing that the primary function of nostalgia is to preserve history that is slipping away, Lowenthal (1985) and Hewison (1987) warn that a nostalgic attitude towards the past is not only trivial but also dangerously lacking in critical thinking. Some scholars go beyond dismissing nostalgia as a romantic 'malaise' of the modern age (Lowenthal, 1985) and suggest an even more negative view of nostalgia as a dangerous obstacle on the way to a better, more progressive future. Berman, for instance, sees nostalgia as a failure of collective cultural confidence (1982), and Creed suggests that nostalgia is an example of how 'modernity helps depoliticise the experiences of the past' (2010: 34).

Pilbrow (1997: 93) furthers this idea but focuses mostly on the political implications of using the word 'nostalgia' at the official state level. In his attempt to conceptualise the contemporary process of coming to terms with the past in Bulgaria, Pilbrow suggests focusing on the concept of dignity and personal memories, while dismissing the term nostalgia as a concept negatively associated with 'fetishising an irretrievable past or utopian longing' (1997: 97). Even though I

would argue against the complete dismissal of the whole concept of nostalgia as a fetishised fixation on the past, it seems that nostalgia has certain negative connotations and is sometimes still used in discourses of blame, i.e. the blame for being stuck in the past. Discussing this conceptual issue, Shevchenko and Nadkarni note that nostalgia in the public and political discourse is sometimes reduced to a 'depoliticised commentary on the past and the present that has no political valence' (2004, 209). In this sense, I would argue that it is possible to accept the problematic variations in the usage of the term (nostalgia) but still acknowledge its political potential. While recognising the selective nature of memories, in order to understand nostalgia and explain it better, we need to avoid a 'moralising attitude' (Morariu, 2012: 291) and instead, appreciate nostalgia in its various forms and manifestations.

Boym offers a more multifaceted view of nostalgia, suggesting that it has a reflective, critical potential. Boym argues that nostalgia does not necessarily mean opposing progress; on the contrary, she views nostalgia and progress as 'Jekyll and Hyde: doubles and mirror images of one another' (2001: 8). Since nostalgia is no longer limited to a spatial longing, it becomes a longing for a simpler, slower time, or, in other words, nostalgia challenges the modern idea of linear time and history as progress. Most importantly, Boym also suggests that nostalgia is not exclusively about the past (2001: 8). In the context of the transition, when history is perceived as fragmented and fractured, the mere existence of nostalgia should be instead seen as a signal of a sense of loss, a need to restore the lost sense of historical coherence, a desire to come to terms with the past and accept it in its variety.

Boym identifies two versions of nostalgia – restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia aims at going back to the way things were in the past; it strives to restore the order of things as they were, usually idealising the past. Reflective nostalgia is a more self-aware way to relate to the past by seeing it in a more critical light and, therefore, not wishing to go back but to understand the past in a more meaningful way, or to come to terms with it. Boym proposes looking at nostalgia's potential to look to evoke a sense of responsibility and critical reflection: 'Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt' (2011: 14).

At the same time, in order to understand nostalgia as a dynamic phenomenon, we need to acknowledge that it is not necessarily only reflective or only restorative. Instead, I suggest that nostalgia is not a negative or a positive concept in itself, but



is always dependant on a certain political, historical, social and cultural context. This is in line with Shevchenko and Nadkarni who argue that, instead of attributing progressive or reactionary meaning to nostalgia, we need to focus on the multiplicity and variety of nostalgic manifestations (2004). Thus, instead of seeing nostalgia as a phenomenon with a stable meaning and value, the attention has to be shifted to the collective essence of nostalgia as a group practice. Such collective agency should be analysed in its diversity, revealing the mechanisms for mobilising certain nostalgic discourses for certain ideological purposes. As an example, Shevchenko and Nadkarni compare nostalgic practices in Russian and Hungarian contexts, showing that the same symbols can be actualised differently depending on the agents' intentions (2004). As Shevchenko and Nadkarni point out, when transferring the concept to another geopolitical context, we need to be aware of the limitations and conditions of this context, because nostalgia is not just inherently there, but can be triggered, shaped and reframed. It is important to note as well, that this comment does not suggest that nostalgia can only be constructed on the official governmental level – nostalgia can as well be constructed 'from below', as a grassroots initiative, and be critical and politically subversive as a part of the civil society.

It is crucial to look at the social and political relations that activate and recontextualise nostalgia in a particular time and place. As a part of collective memory work, nostalgia is a dynamic entity, which is always politicised, reframed, actualised, and recontextualised. Therefore, to understand nostalgia we need to shift our focus from abstract theorising to some specific forms of nostalgia.

Dimitrova proposes an example of nostalgic reframing in the Bulgarian context in her study of the political discourse of Europeanisation in Bulgaria and the discrepancy between party policies and discourse hegemony (2002). Analysing the political scene in Bulgaria in the 1990s, Dimitrova tracks the shifts in the political discourse around the communist past and the potential accession to the European Union, stating that 'in the early stages of the transformation process nostalgia and tradition reigned supreme in the ideologies and reform agendas of both the former communists and the democratic opposition' (2002: 75).

In this particular case study, nostalgic narratives were used and framed by the ruling elites to blame the EU for all of the shortcomings of the government handling of the post-socialist transition. Dimitrova's research (2002), therefore, is a practical example of the various ways that nostalgia can be reconceptualised and reframed

to serve a specific political purpose, thus emphasising the dynamic and political nature of nostalgia. Similarly, Proteau (2016), looking at the Romanian context and analysing the existing museums of the communist past, argues that these museums develop and change over time adapting to the existing conditions. Actualised in changing contexts, remembering can vary from ignoring the past, demonising it, and to retreating to a complete self-victimisation. Proteau argues that it is the evolving context that shapes the gradual development of remembering in the museums, bridging the gap between 'remembrance and purposeful forgetting, individualism and nationalism, memory and history' (2016: 7).

At the same time, the importance of the national context should not be a rigid limitation for collective memory studies. In her critique of the limitations of the contemporary post-communist memory studies, Mihelj argues that it is necessary to acknowledge the increasingly transnational nature of the 'mnemonic battles' as well as the 'uneven power relationships that underpin them' (Mihelj, 2017: 237).

To summarise all of the above, several factors need to be taken into consideration when studying nostalgia, including the specific manifestation of nostalgia, the means of mediation, and the unique combination of the local and global contexts. Thus, it is not the general idea of nostalgia that is studied, but a nostalgia as a practice emerging in a certain context, mediated by certain means, in a certain period and in a certain locality that is affected by specific transnational and intercultural tendencies. In other words, the present research does not aim at providing a broad theoretical framework of nostalgia. Instead, it is looking at a particular manifestation of nostalgia situated in a specific context and mediated in a certain way – namely, post-communist nostalgia in Bulgaria mediated by new Bulgarian cinema. At the same time, by establishing the context firmly, we consider the dialogue between the local and the global by not isolating the Bulgarian case study from the rest of the world. Within this approach, we are not only placing the specific occurrence of nostalgia in its social and political context, but also taking into consideration the specific circumstances of the chosen mediator, namely cinema and the cinema industry in Bulgaria post-1989.

The utopian nature of nostalgia makes it clear that we need to use the term post-communist rather than post-socialist in the Bulgarian case. This particular form of nostalgia is seen in this study as a longing for something that was never really there (but *should have been*) in the past, and yet is still absent from the present

(even though it *could have been*) (Koleva, 2011: 417). Thus the term post-communist nostalgia is used to identify the difference between the desire to go back to the pre-1989 totalitarian regime and the longing for a utopian ideal that has never been reached in the first place.

Koleva identifies three significant tendencies in defining post-communist nostalgia – nostalgia as a ‘feeling of loss in a period of radical changes’, a political rhetoric actualised in a certain context, and nostalgia as a form of cultural production and an example of commodification of history (2011: 419); she then concludes that all these types of nostalgia ‘signal the end of the transition’ and can be observed only when it is impossible to go back and reverse the changes. This view is supported by Creed, who suggests that ‘now [2006] that no one expects or fears a return to socialism, nostalgia is apposite’ (2010: 38). I would, however, disagree with both Koleva and Creed in this argument, as it seems to be working only if we are talking about nostalgia as a form of cultural production – then, the commodification of change does indicate the end of the transition period. If we are talking, however, about nostalgia as a sense of loss, it could be much more nuanced than a commodified version of history. The question here would be whether the audience considers such images nostalgic and how they interpret them. What I argue here is that we cannot assume that post-communist nostalgia means distancing from the past and moving on – instead, it could signal a desire for change and need to review and reappraise the past rather than just accepting it.

Therefore, it is crucial for this research to understand nostalgia as *a sense of loss directly linked to the present and its challenges*, which can be seen as an ongoing struggle to come to terms with the past and evaluate it. In this sense, instead of signifying the finalisation of the transition process, post-communist nostalgia indicates a necessity to deal with a problematic past in the context of the lack of personal agency and dissatisfaction with the present.

It should also be noted that the popular discourses of post-communist nostalgia and the nostalgic representations in cinema should not be conflated and used interchangeably. Firstly, the authenticity of historical representations in cinema is a very problematic area to evaluate, since, in the modern and postmodern readings of history, its objectivity and linearity has been challenged. Thus, we can speak of various versions of history, making cinema one of the multiple possible mediated readings preconditioned by a specific relationship between the media and the

audience that needs to be considered.

Secondly, there is a certain gap between a film that is criticised for having nostalgic, idealised depictions of the past and the way that the audiences might perceive these images. By assuming the direct link between the nostalgic film and the passive response of the audiences, the critics of nostalgia are robbing the audiences of their agency and their right to engage with the representations critically (Pickering & Keightley, 2006). The lack or the presence of the critical potential of nostalgia should not be assumed, but rather, it needs to be examined not only through a versatile analysis of the representations but also through audience response studies. In this research, I argue that it is necessary to acknowledge the role of the memory makers (the filmmakers) and the memory consumers (the audience).

### **Coming to terms with the past**

The term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was initially coined in the discussions around the context of post-war Germany and the need to process the traumatic collective memory of the Holocaust; today the term remains highly problematic and is still being re-evaluated.

Talking about the need to 'process the past' in order to come to terms to it, Adorno warns against transferring a psychological term of 'guilt' into understanding social history and the aftermath of the Holocaust (1963: 91). Instead, he speaks about the 'objectivity' of memory and the impact of the past on the present as an important part of 'working through the past' (1963: 91). Later, this term was also used in talking about the abuse of human rights in East Germany under the communist regime. The present study uses this term in the context of other post-communist countries, and mainly, explores the potential of this concept when we talk about transitional societies, such as Bulgaria.

I would argue that there has been a shift from studying the actual historical events towards trying to evaluate the aftermath of *prehoda* critically and, most importantly, figure out how to process these events in the context of more recent events in Bulgaria. Thus, the attention to *prehoda* now is most likely to be rooted in the desire to find the causes of some contemporary economic, political, social and cultural issues, or, at least, find something or someone responsible for them. Using Vukov's

terminology, this phenomenon can be described as a shift of the public attention from the factual wars (what happened?) to the hermeneutic wars (how do we evaluate the meaning of what happened?) (2008).

Discussing the process of the Bulgarian 'coming to terms' with the communist past, Kazalarska (2008) notes that the fundamental question that remains unanswered is what it actually means to come to terms with the past. Thinking about the process of 'learning how to live with the past' Kazalarska suggests that the only way to measure the success of this process is to understand the possibility for a critical engagement with the past, or rather, a 'co-presence of multiple voices, even if contradictory ones, but voices that are engaged in a dialogue' (2008: 179). The narratives of a 'failed transition' in the Bulgarian case can, therefore, be attributed and linked to the apparent lack of public dialogue, and the lack of coherent representations of history and the subsequent difficulties of evaluating its role in national identity.

The role of the media in coming to terms with the past is discussed in this study in the context of the construction of the collective memory. Thus, this study evaluates the role of cinema as a mediator and its role in facilitating the dialogue, and expressing conflicting memories. In the post-socialist environment, cinema could be viewed as one of the few alternative platforms for public engagement with the past. Talking about processing the problematic past in the post-Yugoslavian context, Jenkins, for example, notes that cinema cannot replace effective lustration policies, but instead it has a 'pre-lustrative role' (2017: 176). It is necessary to open a discussion of the politics of remembering and the concept of contested pasts which is very important in understanding the very diverse range of interpretations of the events of 1989 and their aftermath in Bulgaria.

### **Politics of remembering: contested memory and consensus**

Summarising the various approaches to collective memory, Misztal argues that they can be divided into four main groups of 'theories of remembering': Halbwachs' theory of social memory, the idea of constant influence of the present on the past – 'the presentist theory', the idea of the Popular Memory Group that there is a dominant memory and a 'counter-memory', and, finally, a more recent view on memory as a dynamic place of a constant negotiation (2003: 50). In this study, I argue that, while these four approaches are not mutually exclusive, in the case of

constructing a collective memory in a transitional society a combined approach should be adopted.

More specifically, the most important assumptions while studying collective memory for this research are the following:

- The collective memory of a given society/nation always comprises several 'counter-memories'. In some cases, there is also a dominant ideology, but in other cases, there could be no official/hegemonic ideology (Bulgaria is an example of such diversity of collective memories). Nevertheless, in both cases, there is a constant power struggle between various collective memories, because they are always embedded in the political context of the nation-state;
- Consequently, collective memory is always a space of negotiation. Counter-memories are always 'contesting', or struggling for power.
- Collective memory is an essential part of national identity, where the nation is seen as an 'imagined community' (Anderson: 1991); therefore, fractured collective memory can result in fragmented conflicting identities and vice versa;
- Collective memory can be mediated through various cultural 'sites', including media and cinema; therefore, the process of negotiating contested memories can be studied by analysing these 'sites' of interaction;
- The multiplicity of counter-memories could be seen both as a negative and a positive thing. The problem with this lack of coherence is that it can cause a certain fragmentation of society and identity, a lack of consensus and damaged (sceptical) self-perception. This fragmentation, in its turn, can lead (as it does in the case of Bulgaria) to political apathy, general pessimism and a constant disagreement between different generations. On the other hand, however, this multiplicity of ideologies is a crucial part of a democratic society, as well as a positive sign of change, as opposed to stagnation. Moreover, this is a natural state of collective memory – to be varied, nonlinear, and multiple.

Generally, the two major sectors of contested memories emerge in Bulgaria, the first one has to do with the reimagining of national identity after the fall of communism, and the second one deals with the controversial views on the legacy

of communism in Bulgaria now. In other words, for this study, the whole diversity of contested memories can be divided into two blocks:

- 1) The changing and evolving concept of national identity: evaluation of the impact of the 1989 and *prehoda* on the Bulgarian national identity, the fluidity of national identity after the fall of communism and a new struggle for identification after the end of the Cold War era. Nation-wise, culturally, politically and historically, where does Bulgaria belong now?
- 2) Various ways of evaluating the past and connecting it with the present: What happened during the events of 1989? Who is usually blamed for the current state of Bulgarian society – the communists and their legacy or pro-European politics and the EU? How do we evaluate the legacy of the communist past in Bulgaria and come to terms with the past?

Therefore, the questions mentioned above will be analysed in the case study films, focus groups, and interviews. A more open dialogue and more discussions facilitated by cinema could contribute significantly to a coming to terms with the past and going beyond the so-called 'failed transition' narrative. At the same time, it is understandable that the goal of coming to terms with the past is never to *forget and move on*, but rather to *learn to live with*.

It could be argued that there is a particular interaction between the contested collective memories, that can lead to some level of consensus or, at least, a constructive negotiation. These interactions can be studied in their various forms, including the interaction between media, producers, and consumers. The way that these interactions are carried out in a given society can be a useful marker of their ability to engage with the past in a nuanced and meaningful way.

### **Historical representations on screen**

With the emergence of *Film & History* journal in 1970, established and edited by O'Connor and Jackson, historical film studies as a field reached a new level of development. The range of questions that are most commonly discussed in the field can be broadly structured around a number of binary oppositions that could also be considered as directions of research in the field of historical film studies:

- Link to the past/to the present – debates about whether history in film is a pure reflection of the past or an allusion about the present, or both (Ferro, 1984; Sorlin, 1980);
- Written/oral history – discussing the differences caused by various media and ways of telling and remembering history (O'Connor, 1990);
- Consumerism/activism – analysis of the role of cinema in terms of its influence on the society (the ability to cause an action or reinforce the established ideologies) (Landsberg, 2013);
- Individual/collective – exploring the unique role of the historian (film director in this case) as opposed to the idea of history as a result of collective remembering and collective cultural practices (Rosenstone, 2013; Landy, 2013).

The above-mentioned directions are, of course, not mutually exclusive, but rather, they all contribute to a more profound understanding of the role of the cinematic representations of history. O'Connor, one of the editors of *Image as Artefact*, shares the belief that film is primarily a portrayal of historical events, but with time more and more scholars have argued that history films have closer connections to the present than to the past (Sorlin, 1980; Ferro, 1984; Chapman, 2005): 'Historical films tell us more about the period in which they were made than about the period in which they were set' (Chapman, 2005: xi). The idea of the interconnection of the past and present through film is very important for the present research, as I will be focusing on the link between the events in the past (the communist era, the transition) and the time when the film was produced (contemporary Bulgaria).

Nevertheless, the scholars of both approaches, seeing film as a representation of the past or the present, agree on the unique role of cinema as a tool of history telling, challenging the dominance of the traditional, written version history. In the 1980s and 1990s, the idea of film as a radically different form of history was reinforced in the journals like *The Journal of American History*, *American Historical Review* and *History Today* (Hughes-Warrington, 2006). Rosenstone (2012) opposed the marginalisation of films in historical studies, suggesting that the comparison of written and film history is not relevant or effective. Instead, he proposed to focus on the common nature of all forms of historical knowledge, rather



than on the differences of the media. Rosenstone pointed out that the determining criterion of a truly historical film is that the film engages with the historical discourse instead of just using history as *mise-en-scene* (Rosenstone, 2012).

Rosenstone discusses conventions of modern mainstream historical films in order to evaluate the effectiveness of these films in education as an alternative way of seeing history (2012). He also highlights the difficulties that the historians are facing when dealing with cinema, but still urges the academics to take historical cinema seriously: 'we must begin to look at film, on its own terms, as a way of exploring the way the past means to us today' (2012: 1).

Kuhn takes this discussion further and argues that the only way to introduce film as an equally serious tool of history is to avoid its marginalisation: 'historical films and written histories are not forms of history; they are history' (2002: 32). Kuhn views both historians and historical filmmakers as 'stylists', who do not just describe the historical events, but rather put them in a story, choose different conventional story forms and generally shape the agenda of the historical discourse (2002: 34). At the same time, historical representations in cinema do not exist in isolation from other media and the ideological discourse overall.

Even this brief overview of historical film studies in both general and more specific topics shows that this field is a very well developed one. However, there are some gaps that have yet to be addressed. For example, Hughes-Warrington provides an analysis of five major gaps, including:

- 1) Impact of the new technologies on historical cinema;
- 2) Off-screen aspects of filmmaking, including promotion, merchandise, and fandoms;
- 3) Audience studies;
- 4) Studies of the cinematic style instead of focusing on the factuality and historical evidence;
- 5) Interdisciplinary studies (2006).

Hughes-Warrington defines two major stereotypes, or limitations, that are causing these gaps: the assumption that historical films are 'synonymous with

diegeses' (films are not limited to their plots and other on-screen factors) and that films are a property of the filmmakers. Instead, she suggests understanding historical films as 'sites of relation, and agreement and even contestation among film producers, critics and scholars, promoters and viewers' (2006: 6). In a similar way, the dialogism of memory works as a way to understand time and evolution and, therefore, to escape the limitations of history; as memory is always connected to the present, and, what is more, is being reflected through the lens of today. As Grainge puts it: 'Memory studies draw attention to the activations and eruptions of the past as they are experienced in and constituted by the present' (2003: 1). In a similar vein, Radstone highlights the importance of studying the particular ways of collective memory mediation and articulation (2005). As she argues, memory, even the 'involuntary, personal memory', is always mediated (2005: 135).

Radstone also argues against conflating any history-related texts with memory itself and instead suggests that the memory studies can provide an insight into *how memory is constructed* in relation to the past and present. Thus, to study memory we need to turn to the various forms of mediation and articulations of memory, or, as Radstone puts it, 'the specificity and particularity of discourses and practices' (2005: 134). Cinema, and historical cinema in particular, as a medium creates a unique possibility to combine the study of the specific mode of memory, mediated and articulated through specific means and existing in a particular social and cultural context. The current research meets some of the concerns expressed previously by Hughes-Warrington (2006). Namely, this research is an interdisciplinary study combining sociological, historical and film studies approaches. It focuses not only on the textual and contextual analysis of the films, but also provides an insight into the potential of cinema for triggering negotiation and a coming to terms with the past by engaging the audiences in the focus groups. Cinema is seen as a 'site of relation' (Grainge, 2003), or a field of negotiation of the different versions of history, and a place where opposing views on the past and the transition can clash and interact. If memory is always mediated (Radstone, 2005: 135), then the specific articulations of memory can provide an insight into the ways that the past relates to the present and how the memory of this past is constructed.

### **National and Transnational Approaches to Cinema**

'Histories of national cinema can only [...] be understood as histories of crisis and conflict, of resistance and negotiation' (Higson, 1989:37).

Two of the theoretical preconditions of this study are that, first, national identity and collective memory are directly linked, and, second, that they are mediated by cultural means (including literature, theatre, cinema, as well as museums and other memory practices). Therefore, in order to understand how Bulgaria as a nation-state is coming to terms with its communist past and the post-1989 transition, it is necessary to define the limits of Bulgarian national cinema and understand how Bulgarian national identity is constructed on screen. Since cinema is seen as a place of negotiation, this analysis is done by identifying the contested and consensual elements in this negotiation. In other words, to see the way that national identity is mediated we need to study the dialogue between the local and the global, communicated through the sometimes conflicting images of nationality. It is argued that national identity after 1989 is constructed through negotiation and reference to the local, the regional, and the global.

In Bulgaria, the fragmentation of national identity was most visible after 1989, as the pre-1944 identity was not merely erased, but rather, polarised accordingly to the bipolarity of the Cold War concepts of the East and the West. The Soviet ideology since 1944 in Bulgaria was aimed at legitimising its power by, among other means, establishing a fundamental East-West divide (Genov, 2002; Kaneva & Popescu, 2011). Therefore, after the fall of communism in Bulgaria, the debates around national identity were centred around a whole range of contesting identities, simultaneously suppressed and polarised by the Soviet regime (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011).

After 1989, the mentioned divide between the East and the West did not just go away. Instead, it reopened the whole debate around nation-building and points of national identification. Kaneva and Popescu (2011) argue that the new need for nation-branding has led to a new version of a national identity 'lite', lacking continuity and historicism, and 'packed' to be sold to the West as a commodity. However, it could also be argued that it is the deep connection to the recent historical events that still shape the public debate around national identity. The lack of consensus on the past and the constant direct influence that this has on present social life and politics contribute to the polarisation of society even more. As a result, national identity becomes not only more and more polarised, but also more and more dependent on historical and political identifications with the recent past (Dimitrov, 2001). National identity, therefore, is sometimes foregrounded by historical or

political identity, based on what one's version of the past is. The topic of *prehoda* is often officially avoided, or, vice versa, used as a polarising force. Both of these extreme positions result in a lack of possibility of constructing a more nuanced version of the past.

A regaining of historical continuity and some level of consensus is necessary not only to have a better understanding of what happened but also to bridge the gap between the varied opinions about the past and the different generations having either a very polarised range of opinions (the elder generation) or very little knowledge about the past (the younger generation).

The negotiation of national identity on screen should always be seen as an ideological and political process, and, applying further the idea that culture is always viewed as a site of 'consent' and 'resistance' (Hall, 1981), I would suggest that it is precisely through these elements of contestation and consensus that we can see the shifting boundaries of a nation most clearly. It is important not to oversimplify the role of cinema in this negotiation and not to overestimate the impact of the cinematic representations. Nevertheless, it is crucial to see cinema as a public space for negotiation of contested ideologies (memories, versions of the past in the case of historical cinema), or as 'one of the loci of debates about a nation's governing principles, goals, heritage, and history' (MacKenzie, 2000: 4). This role of cinema seems particularly relevant in the Bulgarian case, where the official platforms for debating the past have been very limited.

Another precondition that is assumed in this study is that cinema can represent the anxieties already existing in Bulgarian society, and national identity mediated on screen reflects these issues. I argue that Bulgarian national cinema reflects the search for a consensus on national identity in at least three ways – by demonstrating an interaction between the local and the global cultural traditions; by establishing a new production and distribution context through interaction with other global and regional cinemas in transnational co-productions; and by reflecting on the transformations of Bulgarian national identity on screen, establishing the shifting limits of the nation but also engaging with a transnational dialogue through reflecting on the role of the Other as an external reference point.

Establishing the definition of national cinema, Higson (1989: 37) suggests that it is important to acknowledge the assumed coherence and unity of national identity.

Higson sees the potential way to establish this coherence by identifying the borders and limits of the nation, referring to Anderson's concept of the nation as an imagined community, limited because it has certain 'finite if elastic' boundaries (Anderson, 1991: 40). It is important to add that, even though the ethnic boundaries are imagined, they are not imaginary, as Jenkins states: 'It is "real", in that people orient their lives and actions in terms of it, and it has very definite consequences' (2000: 10). Such understanding plays an important role in evaluating the potential of cinema as a means of imagining national limits and boundaries. It could be summed up that every nation and its limits can be imagined through mediation, including representations in media, such as cinema; Cinema, as a mediator of national identity representations, therefore, helps establish boundaries of the nation as an imagined community.

At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge that, in most cases, the limits of a nation cannot be clearly identified, and a nation is dynamic in its essence which makes its coherence questionable. National identities, therefore, can also be multiple and contested (Dzenovska, 2005: 174). This multiplicity, fluidity of boundaries and constant shifts in the limits of a nation are not excluded from the traditional national cinema approach. It calls for exploring not only the traditions and historical roots of national identity, but also the conflict embodied in a difference that appears on the margins of national entity as a unity that is 'proclaiming its sense of otherness' through many means including mediated memory (Higson, 2006: 18).

Higson identifies two ways of conceptualizing national cinema – from the point of view of 'establishing varying degrees of otherness', by comparing and contrasting different cinemas, or from the point of view of what he describes as a 'more inward-looking process', or 'exploring the cinema of a nation in relation to other already existing economies and cultures of that nation-state' (2002: 54). By that 'inward-looking' approach Higson defines national cinema in terms of its links to the pre-existing sets of identities (including political, national, economic and cultural) and traditions (2002: 60). In the case of Bulgaria, it should be noted that these approaches complement each other, as Bulgarian national cinema, as with any other small national cinema, is shaped by both – the discourses of Bulgarian national identity, and the ongoing negotiations with Hollywood and other regional cinemas.

The role of the state should not be ignored as well, as it plays a vital role in limiting

and developing national cinema. Higson comments on the importance of the state's role since mid-1910, when 'governments began to recognise the potential ideological power of cinema' and, even much later, the time when governments mobilised national cinema in the face of a certain threat either of a war, occupation or even cultural colonization, stating that 'the state intervenes only when there is a felt fear of the potential power of a foreign cinema' (2002: 61). This note on the role of the state in establishing the cinema industry is particularly relevant to Bulgarian cinema during Soviet times and the era of *kinefication*. The process of *kinefication* was initiated in 1945 and was aimed at promoting cinema as an ideological tool of the regime, initially conducted through establishing movie theatres in rural areas of Bulgaria, equipping schools and community centres with movie screens or even introducing 'travelling cinemas' to cover the most 'backward' areas (Bojilov, 1946; Bratoeva-Darakchieva, 2013). Despite some economic difficulties, in the early years of communist rule in Bulgaria, the number of cinemas in the country had doubled; in particular, this relates to the villages and small towns (Garbolevsky, 2011: 41-42).

The other side of the process of the promotion of cinema as a tool of Soviet propaganda included a gradual restriction of the distribution of foreign film, which, in its turn, led to a significant gap in film programming in the newly established cinemas. Consequently, this pushed the state to finance the Bulgarian national film industry, in order to support 'a strong national cinema, which could guarantee the country's self-sufficiency in terms of film production' (Garbolevsky, 2011: 42).

After 1989, a reverse process of privatisation has been initiated, when the state transferred cinema ownership to the private sector. Despite all these changes, it could be argued that the threat of foreign cinema remained the same, or maybe, became even more significant: Hollywood and more developed western cinema industries gained access to the local Bulgarian market, and, in the context of a developing market economy, Bulgarian cinema faced yet another competitor. It is important to acknowledge that this process of competition with Hollywood was, and still is, not unique to Bulgaria, as most European national cinema face similar challenges (Elsaesser, 2005). On the other hand, the state of the cinema industry in Bulgaria after 1989 was significantly influenced by the economic crisis in the country, hence the drastic change in ownership and the complete lack of financing that lasted for several years after 1989.

Other film industries of the region, such as Romanian, Czech, Slovak, Polish, and

Hungarian, also suffered significant cuts after the collapse of the regime. It is safe to say that all film industries of the countries of the former Eastern Bloc suffered some level of disruption due to the economic instability and rapid privatisation. While, during the communist rule, cinema was considered one of the primary ideological tools, it is not surprising that, during the transition, the priorities shifted significantly.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that some factors of the post-1989 film industry development in Bulgaria make it a distinctive case within the broader European context. This specificity lies mainly in the state's reluctance to support the Bulgarian national film industry even now, almost thirty years after the fall of the regime. Gradually, after the initial period of instability, the countries of the region became more interested and invested in the development of a strong national cinema. For example, some countries of the post-communist bloc with comparable populations, including Hungary and the Czech Republic introduced tax incentives for the film industry. In 2018, Hungary raised its production tax incentive from 25% to 30% for the films shot on the territory of the country, making Budapest one of the most popular film shooting locations in Europe (Screen Daily, 2018). In addition, The Hungarian National Film Fund is supported by the Hungarian government and benefits from the tax revenue from Hungary's National Lottery.

It can be argued that the less amount of state funding is rooted in the low admission numbers in Bulgaria (Admissions per capita: 0.79) in comparison, for instance, to the Czech Republic (1.44), Slovakia (1.2), and Croatia (1.1) (Film New Europe, 2017). The delay in the development of the film industry could also be attributed to the fact that Bulgaria was admitted to the EU later than the countries listed above. Nevertheless, if we look at Romania that became an EU member simultaneously with Bulgaria, it is evident that neither the access to EU funding support, nor the low admission numbers (0.7) are the key determining factors in the success of a national film industry. In the Romanian case, for example, it has been announced that despite the fact that the admission per capita figures are decreasing dramatically (Film New Europe, 2017), a new state aid scheme for the film industry has been adopted (Romania Insider 2018). Meanwhile, in Bulgaria, the approval of the new funding support programme has not been approved yet due to the delays in amending the Film Industry Act (Film New Europe, 2017).

If contrasted to other countries of the post-communist bloc with comparable

populations, Bulgaria seems to be a unique case, in that the financial support by the National Film Centre remains quite limited, and the necessary laws on cinema are developing slowly. Overall, it seems that the state is reluctant to support the national cinema industry. It is not entirely clear, however, what are the reasons for such reluctance. Todorov, for instance, suggests that the lack of support from the state is a form of punishment not dissimilar to the practices of state censorship during the communist rule:

Since censorship in its pre-1989 form is no longer possible, those in power simply limit the freedom of cinema in other ways, by limiting the state subsidies. This happens through law violations, constant excuses about the economic crises, and ridiculous requirements for high film attendance (Todorov 2010).

While this statement might be difficult to prove, it is quite obvious that, despite a similar start in comparison to the other post-communist countries, Bulgaria now seems to lag behind both in state support and in law-making that could help advance this support. Thus, the local factor should be taken into consideration when analysing the specificity of Bulgarian national cinema.

In addition, we have to consider the interplay between the local and the global levels. At the same time, it should be noted that the national cinema approach in this form comes with a number of limitations, and most of them have to do with the dynamics of nationhood and its unstable discursive nature. By that, I mean that such a national approach often ignores the issues of the Other – the difference that is oppressed and that allows for the national unity to happen in the first place. One possible solution to this could be adhering to the idea of nationhood as something that has to be gained, or, perhaps, even regained, after the global, ‘Soviet identity’ (Tischner, 2005) replaced the local national identity. Therefore, nationhood is understood as something that is not inherently essential to a social group, but rather, is a constant process of becoming (Heath, 1978: 10). Taking into consideration the particular aspects that are unique to a given nation, we should still pay attention to the areas of contingency, conflicts, and clashes of interests and powers. National cinema acts as one of the frameworks for negotiating nationhood – be it through appealing to particular memories, wanting to suppress them or to repress the internal differences. Importantly, these differences can become more visible or accentuated in the periods of significant change in the society.



Linked to the above-mentioned critique of the national cinema approach and the growing globalisation of popular culture and media, several scholars in the field introduced an alternative, transnational approach to cinema. Talking about German cinema after the transformations in the 1990s, Halle suggests that in a globalised world, the transformed mode of production significantly affects the representations of identity in the content of the films, resulting in 'changes in representational strategies' (2008: 5). Halle argues that films act as a vehicle (or 'software') of transnationalism: '[...] films in their content and identificatory potentials enact transnationalism. Film, the so-called software in the rapidly transforming audiovisual media, imagines the transnational community.' (Halle, 2008: 6)

This approach tackles the transformations in cinema that go beyond the economy, but rather reflect deeper changes in 'representational strategies' (Halle 2008: 8), that lead to imagining new, transnational communities. I would argue that transnational production does not necessarily result in a transnational representation and, moreover, this does not have to lead to a construction of transnational identity. Instead, I would suggest viewing any transnational co-production as a starting point for a new negotiation of common ground on the level of representations, which has the potential of opening up a dialogue between the participating national cinemas.

Later, in his book *The Europeanization of Cinema: Interzones and Imaginative Communities* (2014), Halle revisits some of his initial ideas to tackle the role of the representations of the Other and the processes of negotiating difference. In particular, he introduces the idea of pre-national formations (Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires) that are still influencing the formation of 'interzones', or 'conflictual dialogic spaces [...] that develop through bordercrossing in the broadest sense' (Halle, 2014: 14). Within this approach, Halle departs from the idea of a centralised European transnationalism, and instead, looks at the more transitional, fluid spaces (using a metaphor of 'bridges') that have the potential to contest diversity.

Halle suggests that in order to situate national cinemas within a broader transnational context, we need to embrace a view of Europe as something that 'does not develop upward and outward but across, through, from below, sideways, crisscrossing terrains' (2014: 184), talking, in particular about the 'interzones' where national identity clashes with the Other. This approach focuses on the mobility and

fluidity of transnationalism and suggests that the most significant dialogic potential is manifested in the borderline, hybrid, conflictual negotiations present in the cinema. This conceptual framework is particularly interesting when applied to the Bulgarian case and, more particularly, to the interplay between the Bulgarian, Eastern European, Balkan and European identity.

Summarising the numerous debates in the field, Higbee and Lim (2010) identify three main approaches to theorising the concept of transnational cinema:

- 1) The national/transnational binary by Higson (2000) – this approach focuses on the critique of the national approach and its limitations, in particular considering the sophisticated essence of the processes of production, distribution, and exhibition in the globalised era. Higbee & Lim see the main drawback of this approach in ignoring the issues of migration and diaspora;
- 2) Transnational cinema as a regional phenomenon – this approach focuses mainly on local cinemas and their contribution to the transgressing of geographical boundaries of a particular region – Chinese cinemas (Lu, 1997), Nordic cinema (Nestingen & Elkington, 2005), Greek cinema (Papadimitrou & Tzioumakis, 2012) and many others.
- 3) Transnational cinema as an approach of studying ‘diasporic, exilic and postcolonial cinemas’ aiming at challenging the western understanding of nation and nationality. The main limitation of this method, as Higbee and Lim say, lies in locating such transnational cinema on the ‘margins of dominant film cultures’ (2010: 10).

There are numerous alternative approaches to transnationalism, and they sometimes centre around different definitions of transnational cinema, using the terms *multicultural* (Shohat & Stam, 2003), the *cinema of transvergence* (Higbee, 2007), *supranational* (Bergfelder, 2005), *world cinema* and many more. In this study, however, the notions of national and transnational are viewed as not mutually exclusive, but as complementing each other on both levels – the level of representations and negotiating identity and the level of economy regarding financing and co-productions.

Thus, I apply an approach very similar to that suggested by Higbee and Lim – a *critical transnationalism* approach, based on the following principles, that:

- Studies how transnational activities negotiate with the national on all levels;
- Is attentive to questions of postcoloniality, politics, and power;
- Scrutinizes the tensions and the dialogic relationship between the national and transnational, rather than simply negating one in favour of the other;
- Understands the potential for local, regional and diasporic film cultures to affect, subvert and transform national and transnational cinemas;
- Pays attention to the largely neglected question of the audience;
- Is engaged in a dialogue with scholarship in other disciplines (2010: 20).

Further analysing the limitations and the possibilities of the transnational approach, Higbee notes that critical transnationalism should address at least two significant gaps in the existing theoretical discussion around the topic. Firstly, Higbee suggests that, while it is important to study the issues of the continuing globalisation processes, the concept of nation should not be ignored or considered irrelevant (2007: 81). Ezra and Rowden also address this issue and suggest conceptualising transnationalism not only on the level of distribution and production, but also seeing the complex interaction on the level of representations of identity. In other words, analyse the ways in which the national is being transformed and 'transcended' by the transnational' (2005: 4). Consequently, they also suggest analysing transnational cinema in terms of hybridity, migration, and diaspora. Higbee, however, points out another limitation of the approach, which lies in the avoidance of a deeper analysis of the problems of the nation and the postcolonial context. Quoting Stuart Hall, Higbee notes: '[...] it is precisely the re-reading or contesting of supposedly fixed "nation-centred imperial grand narratives from a decentred or diasporic position" that makes the "postcolonial" of value to us (Higbee quoting Hall, 1996: 247).

A similar concern about the lack of analysis of the issue of globalization and postcolonialism in transnational cinema studies was expressed by Shohat and Stam, who develop a critique of the Hollywood filmmakers who 'seem to float above petty nationalists concerns' as a sign of a their privileged position, while 'Filmmakers from the "South", on the other hand, cannot assume a substratum of national power. Rather, relative powerlessness generates a constant struggle to create an elusive authentic representation to be constructed anew with every generation' (1994: 10).

It is crucial, therefore, to look at the constant interaction between Hollywood and the smaller national cinemas from the perspective of power distribution. Only through acknowledging the existence or the lack of privilege can we come closer to a better understanding of the dialogue between the local and the global. Another aspect that needs to be considered in this debate is that of the contexts of production and distribution, as this process of negotiation and dialogue is conducted on the both levels – the level of negotiation of national identity through representations, and the level of negotiation of national cinema aimed at securing financing and establishing a position within a wider regional or even global context. The following chart suggests a way to combine these dimensions in the case of the Bulgarian national/transnational cinema analysis.

Approach	Industry (Context)	Cultural traditions and influences (Text and Context)	National identity on screen (Text and context)
National cinema	Local cinema industry in opposition to Hollywood hegemony;	Looking at the national cinematic traditions and cultural continuity of Bulgarian cinema;	Representations of national identity; the process of negotiation of national identity rooted in national history;
Critical transnationalism	European co- productions;  Regional cooperation (Greece, Croatia);	Looking at the position of Bulgarian cinema within the global context: influence of other local and regional cinemas, place in the European and global context;	Representations of dialogue, hybridity, negotiation with the Other, the West/East dichotomy. Exploring themes of diaspora, migration, othering and self-exoticism.

## **Nationalism Studies and the Role of Media in National Reframing**

This section provides an overview of some key conceptual theories of nationalism, relevant to this study. Before I discuss the role of media, and, more specifically, cinema, in the negotiation of national identity, it is important to address some main debates around the concepts of nation and nationalism.

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge the problematic aspects of nationalism as a concept which is often associated in academia with narrow-mindedness and a regressive outlook on the world. While this association is certainly rightful to some extent, this research suggests that the idea of a nation-state is still relevant and has some constructive potential. As Mihelj argues, every form of nationalism carries in it a fundamental duality, being both a ground for division between 'us' and 'them' while also providing 'the basis for social inclusion and solidarity' (2011: 7). Moreover, discussing the nationalism/globalism dichotomy, Mihelj argues that these two concepts can and do coexist in the modern world. Moreover, it is impossible to imagine one without the other:

Nation-states and national identities continue to function as the main building blocks of worldwide systems, and are in fact responsible for making the global interactions possible despite the diversity of cultural assumptions and attitudes (2011: 3).

Therefore, the concept of nationalism is crucial in studying the mechanisms of both inclusion and exclusion. Most importantly, there is a need to discuss nationalism when we talk about the negotiation of state and cultural boundaries. In order to understand the relationship between power and culture, it is necessary to understand the background of some key concepts of nationhood.

Within the functionalist or historical materialist approaches, the formation of a nation is explained as a result of the material development of the society. Both Gellner (1983) and Anderson (1991) talk about the era of industrialization as the time when nationalism was first established as opposed to the earlier 'primordial' view on nationalism, which claims that the nation as a concept appeared in the ancient times and is natural (Hayward, Barry, & Brown 2003: 330). Both say that nation is a social construct and not a naturally inherent category and, therefore,

explain the emergence of nationalism as a function of an industrialised society, where nationalism plays its role as an instrument of sustaining cultural homogeneity.

Anderson follows the functionalist approach to the origins of nationalism and suggests that it emerged at a time when the old traditional ideas of religion, monarchy and temporality had lost their dominance (1982). Anderson argues that print-capitalism emerged as a response to this loss of 'certainties' and provided a new ground for 'imagining communities' in the rapidly changing world (1982: 35).

Also highlighting the importance of media in the emergence of national identification, Gellner sees nationalism as a political principle that is based on materialism and culture. In his theory of political legitimacy, he states that the primary function of nationalism is to contain the contingency of the ethnic boundaries (1983). According to this approach, in order to belong to the same nation, people need to share the will to belong to the same community and to recognise themselves as a part of this community. The members of the community also have to share the same culture, including language, education, and social norms. His approach has been described as Eurocentric by some critics (McLennan, 2006; Gills, 1996); for instance, Gills notes that the very concept of education and high culture as the central forces of progress are reinforcing 'the Eurocentric myth of world history', where progress is equated with capitalism and the Western world (1996: 157). It can be argued that Gellner tried to overcome these limitations by addressing the Balkan region and acknowledging the role of Islamic influence after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Talking about this region, Gellner describes this type of nationalism as *ethnic*.

In his critique of Gellner, O'Leary develops the typology, explaining that ethnic nationalism is characterised by a combination of the privileged classes that have access to the high culture and the 'powerless who are also the educationally deprived, sunk in low cultures' (1998: 49). The role of the 'intelligentsia' in this type of nationalism is insignificant since even though these small groups strive to have access to the high culture, they do not obtain any power from it. Gellner and O'Leary point out that such a type of nationalism is characteristic of 'Eastern, Slavic and Balkan Europe' (O'Leary, 1998: 50). Apart from the unclear geographical scope of this type of nationalism (a combination of 'Balkan' and 'Slavic' Europe named by O'Leary), this statement seems to dismiss the fact that the access to high culture in the former socialist republics was in fact quite widespread. There were high levels

of literacy, comparable to the Western countries, and a significant amount of state funding went into the support of education and the arts (Darden & Grzymala-Busse, 2006). Not undermining the limitations that the 'powerless' people encountered in these countries, it would seem unfair to say that they were 'sunk in low cultures'.

Another aspect to consider in this context is the change that these countries were and still are undergoing after the fall of communism. Such an understanding of the ideal which needs to be achieved in order for the transition to be over could be very problematic, and the very concept of 'not there yet' could be counterproductive and even harm the post-communist countries, such as Bulgaria (Buden, 2010). Not only does this approach invalidate the differences between each constituent country of the former Eastern Bloc, but it also automatically assumes a certain inferiority.

It should also be noted here that the initial assumption of the *civic West* and *ethnic East* dichotomies suggested by Kohn (1944: 1982) and adopted by both Gellner and O'Leary is flawed and problematic. In Kohn's theory, in the Western model, the ideas of a nation appear within the pre-existing state structures, while in the East, the ideas of ethnicity and nationhood come first and gradually become the foundation of the state (Shulman, 2002: 555). Shulman offers a critique of the civil/ethnic and West/East dichotomies in his analysis of the 1995-1996 *International Social Survey Program* (ISSP). He notes that the civic West/ethnic East pattern is not as straightforward, and suggests that the concept of ethnic nationalism itself becomes a rather broad umbrella term that includes not only purely ethnic (race, ancestry), but also cultural (religion, language, traditions) dimensions (2002: 559). Thus, Shulman suggests to distinguish between the two, and argues that, according to the survey, the distinction between the civic West and ethnic East is an oversimplification, and the years under the communist rule have not 'pushed Eastern European nationhood in a strongly cultural direction while greatly weakening civicness' (2002: 583).

While there are some evident limitations to Shulman's study, including the fact that it is based on a survey conveyed thirty years ago, I would argue that in the Bulgarian case, it might illuminate some of the aspects of Bulgarian national identity, namely, the co-existence of strong ethnic and cultural roots (the value of the national traditions, language, and religion) and the civic tendencies of highlighting the long history of Pre-Soviet democratic statehood. Interestingly, in the Bulgarian case, the

pre-communist golden age of Bulgaria from the early 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is described as the period of National Renaissance after Bulgaria gained independence from the Ottoman rule. The National Renaissance is often praised as a time of the Bulgarian cultural revival as well as the re-establishment of the Bulgarian democratic values, suggesting that the political, ethnic, and cultural dimensions of nationhood can and often do coexist.

Another problematic aspect of Gellner's approach is his preference for high culture over mass culture. He sees the accessibility of high culture and education as one of the preconditions of emerging nationalism, pointing out that it is this high culture that fully incorporates the citizen into the national framework, making him 'competent to occupy most of the ordinary positions in a modern society, and which makes him, so to speak, able to swim with ease in this kind of cultural medium' (Gellner, 1983: 89). Even though Gellner fully acknowledges the significance of media as a communicative tool in establishing and maintaining nationalism, O'Leary notes that within such approach the 'functionality of shared culture' is prioritised over media and mass culture (1997: 199). In Gellner's theory of nationalism, the place of low or mass culture in modernity is overlooked, thus failing to acknowledge the role of mass culture and media in the maintenance and negotiation of nationalism.

Viewing the two ideal types of culture as opposed binaries, Gellner, therefore, does not allow for a more nuanced analysis of the role of the varied cultures 'in-between', including mass mainstream culture (Malešević & Haugaard, 2014: 163). Mass culture is not limited to the agrarian version of low culture that Gellner discusses, while it is also not sophisticated enough to be considered high culture. Nevertheless, the variety of the population that in the past decades has had access to mass culture globally implies that it has a significant role in nation formation. Moreover, this also means that the low cultures' ability to create 'collective falsehoods' (Gellner, 1983) is just as relevant when we discuss mass cultural artefacts and their impact as standardised culture accessible to the majority of the population on the national negotiation process. As Malešević and Haugaard point out, it could be that now the society is even more likely to relate to such 'falsehoods', 'as our world has lost certainties of extended kinship networks and the familiarity of the "village green", we are forced to look for, and find, collective warmth and affection in "imagined communities"' (2014: 163).



It is necessary to acknowledge the role of mass culture and the media in the process of nation-building. At the same time, we must not deny the audiences their agency – thus, a functionalist view of mass culture consumption as a straightforward linear process, where the media merely takes on the role of a ‘vehicle’ for information, should be avoided. Instead, we need to go beyond this understanding of media as an instrument or a vessel and address its content and audiences. This critique might be particularly applicable to small nations, and, especially, in the Bulgarian case, new nations that are forced to re-establish their national identity.

Billig in his theory of *banal nationalism* suggests that the media could be considered an important aspect of nation-building as a mundane everyday practice (1995). Billig looks at low-scale everyday manifestations of nationalism, which act as ‘ideological habits that are embedded in everyday practices that become unnoticeable after time’ (1995: 8). Thus, addressing the critique of the somewhat static approach adopted by Gellner, Billig states that nationalism is not only actualised at times of war or conflict but is also manifested on a daily basis in the ‘banal or everyday experiences such as sport, travel, mass media and at home’ (Storm, 2018: 117). Billig’s contribution to nationalism studies then, most importantly, is in shifting the focus to mid-level theorising and empirical studies of the processes of nation construction and representation (Skey, 2009: 333).

Similar to Anderson and Gellner, Billig attributes the crucial role of nation-building to culture, once again reaffirming the media’s role in communicating national identity and establishing cultural hegemony to sustain the national idea. Acknowledging the significant input of all three theorists to the field, I can note that they all tend to use a functionalist and instrumentalist approach in their analysis of media, which means that media is seen as a solid homogenous structure used unequivocally to transmit a message and reinforce the nationalist framework of a given state. For instance, Billig states that the national media shapes and addresses the imagined community and national public (1995). On the contrary, I argue that such an understanding ignores the role of the audience in media consumption. Instead, we need to address the processes of interaction and negotiation with the audience, since the media does not shape national identity on its own and it only plays a certain role in this negotiation.

As Madianou notes, a new approach needs to be adopted for a more balanced view of the role of the media in nation-building (2005). She argues that there is a

significant gap between two main approaches in media theory – one that privileges the role of media, while ignoring the role of the audiences, and the other that instead focuses on the identities and audiences without considering the role of media (Madianou, 2005: 7). Instead, we need to adopt an approach that would be able to combine and connect these dichotomies. Moreover, there is a need to step away from merely assuming the importance of the media in the process of national identity formation and, instead, engage critically with ‘the different constituencies that are seen (or not, as the case may be) to belong to the national community’ (Skey, 2009: 336). Skey suggests that this argument helps to identify another limitation of Billig’s theory – the assumption of a stable nation and a homogenous national landscape (2009: 340). Instead, he argues, we need to address the dynamics of a given nation in at least two dimensions – the local and global. The local means the political construction of a context at a particular time by particular political discourse, while the global is the transnational influence that could have a destabilising potential. Both these factors, of course, could only be artificially separated for analysis, but are crucial for understanding the dynamics of nation-building and the role of the media in it.

As Skey summarises it, firstly, nationalism and globalisation should be seen as co-existing factors rather than binary opposed tendencies, and secondly, nation-formation should be theorised as a dynamic and unstable process, that ‘in particular periods and places may become stabilised and naturalised’ (2009: 340). The most important outcome of this critique is the suggestion that it is crucial to shift the focus to studying these ‘gaps’ in times of change, re-negotiation, instability or conflict, answering the questions of *when* and *why* the political elites actualise these narratives of nationalism. Brubaker suggests that such reframing happens when there is a need for re-building national identity, and nation-states become ‘nationalizing states’, where nationalism is ‘produced -- or better, it is induced -- by political fields of particular kinds’, while nationalist movements ‘flourish today largely because of regime’s policies’ (1996: 17). Kolev, for example, talks about such a moment of actualization when he discusses the post-communist transformations and lists these events as one of the pre-conditions that led to ethnic tensions in Yugoslavia, but not in Bulgaria and Romania (2018).

Studying a number of post-communist countries, Brubaker describes several examples of nationalising states that emerge when there is a need to establish or

re-establish a national identity that was for some reason lost (2011). Brubaker identifies the themes or motifs that could be found in the nationalist discourse of nationalising states, and it seems that all of them are applicable to the Bulgarian case (2011). For instance, it is evident that in the modern Bulgarian state, the Bulgarian nation is the 'core nation', based on 'ethnocultural terms', including the unity of language (Bulgarian and the Cyrillic alphabet) and religion (Orthodox) (Brubaker, 2011: 2-3). It can also be argued that the state is perceived 'as the state of and for the core nation', where the Bulgarian nation is a dominant group.

As Kojouharov observes, Bulgaria still preserves its 'self-perception as the bearer of Slavic civilization; as the people who suffered the most; and as the nation with the most heroic and costly contribution to Turkey's defeat in 1912' (2004: 292). Hence, the image of Turkey associated with Islam has until now been used as an image of an external aggressor for Bulgaria, or, a 'stronger bully' in Brubaker's terms. As can be seen from these examples, nationhood, especially in Bulgaria, is a result of constant negotiation and reframing, therefore, no nation is stable or coherent forever, so there is a need to evaluate when and why the nationalist framework is being utilised (Brubaker, 2006). In this respect, Bulgaria can be seen as a valuable case study, where nation formation as a dynamic process emerges in times of reshaping, transformation, political and social change.

Acknowledging Brubaker's contribution, Petrovici criticises the relative apoliticism of his cognitivist approach, suggesting that it lacks the necessary acknowledgement of the impact of the existing power relations on the processes of everyday interactions (2011). Petrovici suggests linking the discourses of nation formation to the specific 'historical fields of forces' (Brubaker 2011: 71) that shape the processes of negotiation and contestation, acknowledging thus the relational and contextual essence of power shaped by the confines of its historical space and time (Petrovici, 2011).

Not undermining the local contexts, it is crucial to acknowledge that similar processes are in place in many countries, and there is a need to search for the unifying factors resulting in nationalism and populist discourses all over the world. Thus, we need to view nationality as an unstable fluid process of negotiation conditioned by the exact and specific political, economic and cultural contexts. For example, Petrovici describes cultural communities as 'imagined not as a homogeneous category with fixed or fluid boundaries, but as a field of social

relations' (2011, 59), which correlates to Hayward's vision of national cinema as a process of negotiation, or 'a series of sets of relations between national film texts, national and international film industries, and the films' and industries' socio-political and cultural contexts' (2005: 85). It can be, thus, argued that in the Bulgarian case, national cinema emerges as an important actor in the process of national identity negotiations.

Hayward argues that 'the role of national culture is (still) to suppress political conflict and disguise it as imagination—image/nation—a function that is so clearly manifest in the very problematic issue and conceptualisation of national cinema' (2005: 88). This comment suggests that the main function of national cinema is the maintenance of the national boundaries achieved through the exclusion of the ethnic minorities and eliminating any variation of national identity. I would, however, argue against the idea that all national cinemas are non-inclusive by definition. Firstly, national cinema should not be equated to nationalism, since cinema offers a starting point for a discussion or a negotiation about national identity, and has the potential to either support the hegemonic nationalist position or challenge it. While it might be true that national cinema is always to some extent normative, e.g. it negotiates the borders between the national and the external world, it still could be nuanced and dialogical in the ways that it deals with the deviations from the 'norm'. In a similar vein, Confino suggests to 'avoid artificial distinctions, even as heuristic devices, and to explore how people were, at one and the same time, say, local and national' (2006: 182). I argue that these areas of intersection, dialogue, negotiation, and sometimes conflict of national identity deserve a special attention.

To summarise all of the above, it is necessary to take into consideration that a) the media are diverse, varied in their ideological agenda, b) the audiences are diverse, as even in countries where there still is a titular nation, like Bulgaria, there are diasporic and minority audiences, and c) media communication is a two-sided interaction: national identity building is a process of negotiation, not a straightforward consumption of a media message, where the audience is completely denied agency. Far from being just a passive medium, cinema, thus, should be analysed in terms of how it problematizes and highlights national identities in a specific context.

## The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis aims to evaluate the role of cinema in making sense of the past in post-1989 Bulgaria. I am hoping to achieve this with the help of an interdisciplinary and multimethod approach by overviewing the socio-political and cultural context of the post-communist Bulgaria in chapters two and three and then, proceed to evaluate the negotiation between the memory makers and the memory consumers in chapters four, five and six.

Chapter one will outline the key methodological principles of the current research. This chapter will also provide a critique of the current state of the field of mediated memory studies. Starting with identifying some of the shortcomings of the field of collective memory and mediated memory, in this chapter, I aim to offer an alternative methodological approach to mediated memory as a place of negotiation between the representations of memory, the memory makers, and the memory. In the present research, I am using a multimethod approach that is a combination of several qualitative methods. These methods include an historical analysis of the context of the post-1989 transition in Bulgaria and its influence on the cinema industry, a narrative analysis of a selected body of case study films about the transition made in Bulgaria in the years between 2008 and 2016, focus groups with the audience of various age groups and backgrounds, and semi-structured interviews with some of the prominent contemporary Bulgarian film-makers. The idea behind this approach is to study the process of collective memory negotiation mediated and facilitated by cinema in its complexity and its multiple levels. Memory negotiation, thus, is seen as a dynamic process requiring engagement not only from the creative memory makers but also the potential audiences who work together to make sense of the past through constructive dialogue.

In chapter two of this thesis, I will provide the general context of the events of 1989 and the transition in Bulgaria. This chapter focuses on the memory policies and memory practices that exist in Bulgaria today. In this chapter, I demonstrate the gaps and inconsistencies that exist in the politics of remembering and evaluating the communist legacy in Bulgaria. I argue that in the context of a lack of official illustration, several informal initiatives and cultural interpretations come forward and provide the much-needed reflection on the communist past. It is suggested that these informal ways of reflecting on the communist past act as potential steps towards a more inclusive and versatile way of coming to terms with the past.

In chapter three, I look in more detail at the development and the milestones of the Bulgarian national cinema as one of such alternative informal ways of reflecting on the recent past. In the opening, I propose an approach to national cinema that is focused on the negotiation between the local and the global on the levels of the representations, the production and distribution context, and the reoccurring stylistic and narrative themes. This chapter evaluates the role of the national cinema as a space for negotiating collective memory and collective identity. This potential is analysed both from the specific national and the global transnational perspectives. This chapter also provides a more specific analysis of the context of the cinema industry in Bulgaria, including its history, its development after 1989 and the following transformations after the privatisation of the cinema sector. Some reoccurring themes, including intertextuality and absurdism, are evaluated.

Chapters four, five, and six of this thesis present the main results of the data collected in the film analysis, focus groups, and interviews. Chapter four provides an overview of nationalism studies and studies of the role of media in the process of national identity negotiation, in particular, at the times of changes and transformations. The chapter analyses the representations of national identity and the interplay between the perceptions of the East, West and the various reflections on the role of othering. This chapter incorporates the results of all data gathered in the course of the research, including the cinematic representations of national identity, the discussions in the focus groups and the interviews. The main focus of the chapter is the role of cinema in the processes of national identity negotiation and, in particular, the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, and the manifestations of hybridity.

Chapter five looks at the contested collective memories about the post-1989 transition in Bulgaria, focusing specifically on the processes of memory negotiation and contestation, while also evaluating the role of cinema in coming to terms with the past. After establishing the theoretical framework surrounding the studies of historical representations, in this chapter, I explore the narratives of fragmentation, polarisation and unity that exist both in the case study films and in the following discussions in the focus groups and interviews.

Chapter six will, finally, analyse in more detail one of the most controversial mechanisms of dealing with the past – the phenomenon of post-communist nostalgia. This chapter focuses on evaluating the critical and enabling potential of

post-communist nostalgia manifested in its ability to showcase and highlight the shortcomings of the present. In particular, this chapter demonstrates the constructive aspects of nostalgic perceptions of the past. Nostalgia, thus, is seen as mainly a critical indicator of a lack of something in the present rather than a rose-tinted longing for an idealised past.

## Chapter 1 Methodology

### 1.1. Methodological Limitations in Collective Memory and Media Memory Studies

This chapter examines some of the key limitations of collective memory studies, and proposes a way of overcoming these limitations within the scope of the current research. It is argued that the most problematic features of the research area, including its interdisciplinarity and conceptual vagueness, could also be viewed as potential strengths.

The interdisciplinarity of the memory studies field area is one of its strengths, allowing for a certain 'open-endedness' (Vermeulen, 2012). At the same time, there are also several weaknesses deriving from this conceptual freedom. This brief overview is aimed at revealing the most critical gaps and methodological difficulties in the field.

Talking about the interdisciplinarity of memory studies, Erll points out that memory studies can only be seen as a collaborative project, enriched by various methodologically different approaches, or, in other words, is 'not merely a multidisciplinary field, but fundamentally an interdisciplinary project' (2008: 3).

Further, Erll mentions other examples of the interdisciplinary interchange in cultural memory studies, including inputs from cultural history, neuroscience, social psychology, history, sociology, linguistics and many more. Seeing cultural memory studies as a valuable interchange between different disciplines is essential for this research as well, which is mostly a mix of history, sociology, and film studies. It should also be noted that some interdisciplinary interchange is more favoured by the researchers (such as oral history, history, cultural studies, for instance), while some other areas remain relatively isolated from the 'memory turn'. For example, in his critique of the memory studies field, Huyssen suggests that the areas that call for future collaborations include legal and migration studies (2012). He also argues that memory studies 'should become much more transnational and pay attention to transnational effects of discourses' (2012: 227).

The current study, among other goals, contributes to the filling of this interdisciplinary gap by including an analysis of the reoccurring themes of national



identity negotiation in Bulgarian cinema, as well as a contextual overview of the transitional justice in the form of lustration policies in post-socialist Bulgaria. The influence of transnational discourses of contested memories will be tackled by analysing the influence of the accession of Bulgaria into the European Union on memory politics (more specifically, in cinema, through co-productions). The transnational aspect of memory politics will also be considered through comparison of the Bulgarian situation with that in other post-communist countries.

Another issue resulting from the interdisciplinarity in memory studies is a certain terminological diversity and a lack of conceptualisation. As Confino puts it, 'Memory studies is currently more practiced than theorized' (1997: 1387). More specifically, this problematizes the conceptualising of the dichotomy between the individual and collective, which is why some categories from psychology are still used metaphorically in memory studies, particularly in those that are dealing with a problematic or traumatic past. At the same time Irwin-Zarecka suggests that 'when speaking of social forgetting, we are best advised to keep psychological or psychoanalytical categories at bay and to focus, rather, on the social, political, and cultural factors at work' (1994: 116).

Thus, the conceptual ambiguity becomes the primary target of criticism of collective memory studies as a field. It is important to emphasise once again that this study does not aim at creating a universal categorisation. However, being aware of the limitations of this approach, it seems logical to view collective memory as an 'operative metaphor' (Erll, 2008:5), that describes collective and individual memory as a part of a coherent and constant memory-making process. Traditionally, individual and collective memory are seen as two different levels of communicating with the past, on the biological level of an individual and a social level as a community correspondingly. This study, however, avoids such purely analytical distinction and adheres to the approach suggested by Erll: 'There is no such thing as pre-cultural individual memory; but neither is there a Collective or Cultural Memory (with capital letters) which is detached from individuals and embodied only in media and institutions' (2008: 5). Instead, she argues, the dynamic nature of the varied contexts shapes the media representations that, in their turn, can actualise varied responses in the audience.

Furthermore, addressing the problematic dichotomy of the individual and collective in memory studies, we must mention the justified criticism of the apolitical

tendencies in memory studies offered by Kansteiner (2002). Kansteiner suggests that those who have experienced certain traumatic events do not always have an equal opportunity to influence the construction of collective memory since they can only be able to shape national memory 'if they fit within a framework of contemporary interests' (2002: 181). Therefore, it is crucial to consider the politics of memory in the context of the relationship of power within society. This necessity, consequently, justifies the need for a deep historical analysis of the context of the policies of remembering conducted in this thesis, applying the notion of 'memory contests' in the context of the redistribution of power over collective memory in post-1989 Bulgaria. This is also linked to the previously mentioned need for enriching the already multidisciplinary field of memory studies with studies of transitional justice and lustration policies.

At the same time, it is equally vital to avoid political reductionism, as Confino warns: 'The problem with memory defined in terms of politics and political use is that it becomes an illustrative reflection of political development and often is relativized to ideology' (1997: 1388). Furthermore, by sacrificing the cultural and social to the political, we tend to downplay the importance of the mundane, the less evident expressions of memory, and the areas where memory is implied rather than directly present.

Speaking about the less obvious areas of collective memory construction (particularly using the example of collective memories about the Holocaust), Kansteiner also warns against the reduction of memory studies to political studies, and advocates seeing the importance of the so-called 'low-intensity' collective memories embodied in everyday practices (Kansteiner, 2001: 11). In a similar vein, Confino also offers to embrace the multiplicity of memory, since it 'makes it possible to avoid artificial distinctions, even as heuristic devices, and to explore how people were, at one and the same time, say, local and national' (2006: 182). In the present research, I argue that cinema can be seen as an example of such a mundane, or vernacular, presence of memory.

The approach to memory in its multiplicity also helps to 'avoid essentialism and to reject arguments that impose cultural homogeneity on a heterogeneous society' (Confino, 2006: 181). The practical and, perhaps, most constructive and effective outcome of this approach is the tendency to see the common denominator in a given society, which exists despite the conflicting interests and differences in memories

and memory discourses, posing the question 'how, then, in spite of all these differences and difficulties, do nations hold together?' (Confino, 2006: 182). In the case of Bulgaria, collective memory became a problematic phenomenon, highlighting the political, social and cultural differences that had existed in the society long before the fall of communism. As some studies show (Ganev, 2014), until a very recent time, there has not been a consensus regarding the evaluation of the events of 1989. Both in the Bulgarian media and political sphere, various collective memories have been used to support opposing views on the legacies of communism, which became most visible in the context of the debates around the lustration policies and dealing with the crimes of communism.

A similar multiplicity of views can be noted in the case study films sampled for this research. It becomes evident that there is still no agreement on the historical influence of the transition and the impact that it has had on the current political, economic and social scene in Bulgaria. However, I would agree that this diversity of interpretations does not necessarily mean that there is no coherent national identity, or at least, a common denominator for this identity. Therefore, the central question will be: how do these diverse interpretations of history engage with national identity? In order to analyse this common denominator, a detailed study of the interaction between various memories is still required. This study aims at addressing this need by analysing the diversity of the various manifestations or attempts of coming to terms with the past in the new Bulgarian cinema. It is crucial, therefore, to understand and evaluate the unifying or at least dialogical potential of cinema as an alternative platform of public memory negotiation.

On the other hand, having discussed the role of media in maintaining an imagined community and mediating collective memories, it is also important to acknowledge the debates around the role of the individual in history, which inevitably comes to light when we talk about the producers of representations as memory makers (Kansteiner, 2001). The category of memory makers is also crucial when we discuss memory mediation and see representations of history as a result of a creative process of construction.

In his theory of cultural trauma, Alexander provides an example of the role of powerful individuals in the construction of collective memory, talking about the so-called 'trauma process', when a certain disruption or crisis becomes a trauma only after being adopted by powerful 'carrier groups' (2001: 11). More specifically, the

members of such carrier groups represent the ideas, desires, and interests of a certain community to the wider audience, creating a certain meaning struggle. Developing this idea further and reflecting on the role of intellectuals in mediating history, Eyerman notes that quite a wide scope of social groups can become 'carrier groups', which is particularly useful when we speak about cultural mediation of media and visual (cinematic) representations of history (2001).

In the context of this research, it is quite important to recognise the role of the individual (the filmmaker in this case) in the process of 'memory making' and understand the message that the individuals as members of 'carrier groups' want to express. In order to do this, special attention should be devoted not only to the representation itself (the text, the film) but also the author of this representation and their awareness (or lack of) of their role in the 'meaning struggle' and memory contest. At the same time, it is crucial to avoid, as Kansteiner puts it, the 'unself-conscious return to the central role of human agency in history (now as the maker of representations)' in memory studies (2001: 191). Kansteiner suggests to retain a critical distance to this aspect of memory construction and, more specifically, to the way that the intentions of the maker, the representations themselves and the consumer of those representations interact:

The formal and semantic qualities of historical representations might have little in common with the intentions of their authors, and neither the object's characteristics nor the authors' objectives are good indicators for subsequent reception processes (2008: 22).

This comment on the subjectivity of studying historical representations as a text becomes even more crucial when we take into consideration the tendency or the 'shift' towards the 'cultural reading' of historical representations. Both Kansteiner and Confino warn against shifting the priority towards the representations of collective memory, reducing memory to culture and, therefore, criticise the tendency to study representations of collective memory in isolation from the 'collective' itself (the audience in this case). Talking about the link between the processes of representation, producing and consumption, Kansteiner notes that the process of collective memory construction is an overlapping, ongoing process and the only way of studying it is to 'illuminate the sociological base of historical representations' (2008: 12). Confino also notes that it is crucial to equally acknowledge the participants of the processes of memory contestation, representation, and

reception, or 'to understand all of them as intertwined – memory as a whole that is bigger than the sum of its parts' (2006: 182).

To conclude, this section has revealed several gaps and areas of research and some methodological problems, which require future improvement. After summarising the ideas mentioned above, I would suggest a number of ways of enhancing the methodological clarity of the field that are tackled in the present study:

- 1) Embrace the interdisciplinarity of the field, while also working on including the new full range of disciplines, including migration studies, transnationalism, and transitional justice. The present study serves as an example of an intersection of these mentioned fields.
- 2) Introduce parity in studying representation and reception, shifting the priority from representations studies to an approach that is inclusive of other stages of memory construction, namely production and reception. This is tackled in the present study through introducing focus groups with the audiences.
- 3) Analyse the political context in connection with identity and culture – it is crucial to evaluate the specific political context within which a certain version of history and a particular version of a national identity is actualised (Brubaker 1996). The political context frames the discussion in the following chapters of this thesis.
- 4) Addressing the need for a conceptual clarity of the theorisation in the field; The key concepts and the methodological aspects of the present study are outlined in the following sections of this chapter.
- 5) Seeing collective memory as a process of constant negotiation and contestation of discourses. The present study examines collective memory in its dynamics shaped by the contested versions of the past.

Being aware of the listed inconsistencies in the field, I aim to address some of them on the stage of conceptualising this study, before proceeding further and outlining the objectives of this research and specifying the methods of data collection.

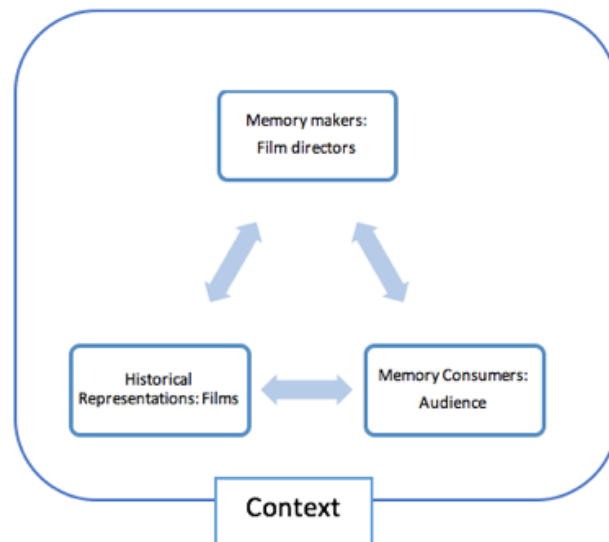
## 1.2. The 'Hermeneutical Triangle' of Collective Memory: The Approach

Interestingly, at least two of the authors discussed above (Kansteiner, Confino) use a metaphor of a triangle as an alternative approach that could resolve the problem of the lack of connection between the representation, the maker and the audience. In this section, I would like to provide explanations for these models of collective memory and describe how this can be used in relation to my research of the Bulgarian collective memory about the events of 1989.

Confino describes the concept of a history of memory (which could be applied to collective memory as well) as a 'commingling of reception, representation, and contestation' (1997: 1388). In terms of methodology, Confino suggests that this approach could help articulate 'the connections [...] between representation and social experience' (1997: 1388).

Kansteiner, on the other hand, describes an approach that also is built on a metaphor of a triangle, stressing the importance of articulating the connections between the elements of the triangle ('memory makers, memory users, and the visual and discursive objects and traditions of representations'): 'This hermeneutical triangle implies an open dialogue between the object, the maker, and the consumer in constructing meaning' (2002: 27).

Even though Kansteiner and Confino offer quite different interpretations of what the main actors are in the whole process of collective memory construction, it seems that they agree on the importance of audience studies and sociological and historical analysis of the context of memory contestation and, consequently, representation. Being aware of the risks of oversimplifying collective memory and reducing it to a model, this study is built around a similar triangular structure, taking into consideration the various aspects of collective memory construction. In order to establish some conceptual clarity, I would suggest a following application of the above mentioned hermeneutical triangle to the case of cinematic representations of the events of 1989 and post-1989 *prehoda* in Bulgarian cinema:



*Figure 1 – the triangular approach to mediated collective memory studies*

In this chart, the central focus is the interaction and negotiation between the historical representations on screen, the film directors, and the audience, while all these three elements of the triangle are influenced the historical, social, political and cultural context of the moment. Acknowledging the problematic nature of the concept of authorship in cinema (Bennett, 2005; Cook, 2007), in this research, I step aside from the debate evaluating the contribution of the director or other creators to the final film text as a product. Instead, I am interested in the negotiational aspect of films as memory texts, shifting my focus to the dialogue between the filmmakers and the audiences. Thus, I view the filmmaker as a figure that is empowered to select collective memories and shape them through the lens of their own approach to history, thus partaking in the process of collective memory negotiation process.

It is the specific context that allows for and limits the level of the openness of the dialogue between the elements of the triangle. Films are seen both as objects of study in their own, but also as carriers of certain discourses and traditions both on national and transnational levels. The arrows between the elements represent the interaction in the form of negotiation and contestation of memories. It is suggested that, as a result of such interaction and mediation by film, collective memories are being constructed and contested simultaneously. Furthermore, each element of the triangle can be treated as a field for social contestation and discursive struggle (Brubacker 1996). Thus, the process of negotiation of memory is not limited to the

interaction between the filmmakers, the audience and the films. It is acknowledged that there is a level of collective memory contestation present at every level of the triangle, allowing for a certain fluidity and dynamic at any given point in time. It should also be noted that the interaction between the elements in the model is not a static process. Instead, I acknowledge the dynamic nature of the processes of collective memory negotiation. The analysis in the present research provides a snapshot of collective memory negotiation at a given time and in a particular context. Therefore, it is suggested that any element of the triangle, as well as the connections between the actors, has the potential to change.

### 1.3. Multimethod Research

The current study suggests a multimethod approach in order to approach the hermeneutical triangle of collective memory in a more versatile way. The conceptualisation of mixed method approach in humanities and social science is quite problematic, as there are multiple definitions given to this research, including, for example, 'integrative research' (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), 'multimethod research' (Hunter & Brewer, 2003; Morse, 2003), and 'mixed research' (Johnson, 2006; Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Despite the differences in these definitions, as the overview by Burke and Turner shows, a majority of the authors agree that mixed research assumes a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. There is a different opinion, though, that mixed method could also be used in a broader sense and include 'within-research-paradigm mixing' (Hunter in Burke), or, in other words, a combination of purely qualitative or purely quantitative methodology.

The present study is using the term 'multimethod' in order to stress that 'different styles of research may be combined in the same research project. These need not be restricted to quantitative and qualitative' (Hunter, 2007: 54). At the level of research design, the term multimethod also refers to the way that the various methods interact in the research, meaning that they are used to triangulate each other: 'Thus, each study is planned and conducted to answer a particular sub-question, and the results of the research triangulated to form a comprehensive whole' (Morse, 2003: 192), instead of testing the same hypothesis by different means (as the classical definition of method triangulation suggests). This study is an example of multimethod research that uses different qualitative methods



(methods belonging to the same qualitative paradigm) to study different aspects of the same phenomenon (collective memory).

Despite the conceptual differences between the notions of mixed and multimethod research, it seems that the challenges and advantages that they face are quite similar. Common pitfalls lie in the sphere of interpreting the data and creating an explanatory model that could incorporate all parts of the research without isolating any aspects of it. In other words, most of the limitations of the multimethod approach lie in the area of conceptualisation, either in the early stages of the research or at the level of integrating and analysing the results. For instance, Evans and Stasi argue that the difficulties in conceptualising methodology sometimes can even result in the 'absence of methodological discussion' (2014: 7) in the field of fan studies, or, as Stacey (1993) calls it, the 'missing discourse of methodology'. These difficulties regarding conceptualisation can be partially reduced by embedding methods in the early stages of the conceptualisation of this research. Namely, the initial understanding of collective memory as a process of negotiation requires a methodology that is addressing all elements of the triangle mentioned above as well as the connections between the films, the audience, and the filmmakers.

Therefore, in order to overcome some of the limitations of multimethod approach (namely, the conceptualisation difficulties), the data analysis obtained from films, interviews and focus groups has to be integrative and, therefore, focused on the same aspects, that of national identity and historical representations and their role in shaping collective memory mediated by cinema. Firstly, the data will be analysed from the point of view of the emerging themes and contested memories. Further, the analysis will be focused on the most problematic conflict and consensus points in the data.

The anticipated outcome of all three parts of the research is a combination of contested and consensual memories represented in cinema and articulated by the film directors and the audience. Therefore, the problem of data integration is addressed in this research with the help of a systemic approach. The anticipated nature of this interaction could be in the form of coping strategies (of coming to terms with the past), present in the form of a contest (conflicting counter-memories), or in the form of finding a common denominator (a consensus). The use of the three methods is also an exploration of the methodological issues of collective memory

studies, helping to test the limitations of this approach. As Biltereyst notes: 'Only few historiographical projects on film audiences attempted to combine methodologies, hence raising questions of methodological integration, synergy and interdisciplinarity' (2012: 692)

The use of a variety of methods was also praised in the critique of methodological coherence in film studies:

[Advocates of a 'new film historiography'] heavily criticized the dominance of a certain type of methods and concepts [...] which do not sufficiently take into account contextual issues on production, distribution and reception (Biltereyst, 2012: 693).

Instead of prioritising the use of ahistorical text-oriented methods, this study aims to understand the importance of the whole process of memory construction, taking a systemic approach towards collective memory (seeing it as a process of negotiation). The multimethod approach, therefore, not only helps to bridge the gap in media memory studies by looking at the audience and the potential of cinema as an alternative media but also allows to benefit from the interdisciplinarity of the field fully.

#### 1.4. Methods

As suggested previously in the flowchart justifying the methodological approach, there are four primary elements of the methodology of this research:

1. context
2. film representations
3. audience reception or memory consumers
4. filmmakers or memory makers.

An analysis of the interaction between those elements (contested and consensual memories) is a basis for a new model of collective remembering about the post-1989 transition in Bulgaria. The analysis of the data obtained from film analysis, focus groups and interviews answers the central questions of this study: what are the contested and the unifying collective memories about *prehoda* in Bulgaria and what is the role of cinema in this process of negotiation? The following

section provides some details on the specificity of the chosen methods: film analysis, focus groups, interviews, and an analysis of the context.

### **Context: a historical analysis**

The analysis of the context will be mainly historical and will provide a general overview of the commemorative practices in post-1989 Bulgaria. Main areas that will be covered include:

1. The political and economic climate before and after 1989;
2. Memory practices and memory culture in Bulgaria post-1989, including museums, memorials, lustration policies, grassroots initiatives;
3. Development of the cinema industry in Bulgaria before and after 1989:

In terms of the new Bulgarian cinema, the following aspects are considered:

- new Bulgarian cinema and film festivals
- stylistic features and traditions of new Bulgarian cinema
- problems of new Bulgarian cinema promotion
- themes and concerns of the new Bulgarian cinema about *prehoda*.

### **Film Analysis**

The film analysis includes a contextual analysis (a study of social and historical aspects of a given period, when the film was created and perceived) and a textual analysis of the typical patterns or themes (national representations, historical representations and representations of nostalgia) (Bordwell & Thompson, 2009). The stages of the thematic analysis include:

- 1) Analysis of all major themes that are present, focusing on the conflicting memories linked to national identity and coping with the past after 1989 and *prehoda* in Bulgaria;
- 2) A detailed analysis of the aspects of national identity on screen, from the perspective of national and transnational film studies, focusing on three major aspects: cultural traditions and influences in new Bulgarian cinema about *prehoda*, the aspects of production and distribution, and the specificities of national identity representation on screen;

- 3) A detailed analysis of the various representations of the past as various ways of coming to terms with it;
- 4) Analysis of the nostalgic and critical elements in the cinematic representations;

Therefore, it can be stated that the film analysis will be a combination of a text-based, a theme-based and a historical approach (Aumont, 2004). It is important to note that the films will not be looked at from the point of view of authenticity or historical accuracy. Moreover, the variety of historical representations and the gaps in these representations could in themselves become an object for analysis.

According to the aims and research questions of this research, the film sampling is intended to achieve a certain depth of understanding of the role of cinema in making sense of the events of 1989 and the transition (Patton, 2002). Therefore, multistage purposeful sampling is used to select the films that could provide the required level of saturation (Palinkas, et al. 2015).

The data selection is based on three factors: 1) time of release and production (films produced after 2008 (the start of the *revival* of the Bulgarian cinema)) 2) subject (films about *prehoda*) 3) recognition (popularity on the domestic market and international acknowledgement). Thus, the film sampling comprises the following stages:

- 1) Accessing a full list of new Bulgarian cinema (Bulgarian National Film Archive);
- 2) Defining the period: 2008 – 2016, the capturing the changes after the accession of Bulgaria to the EU; 2008 was also the year when first lustration policies were debated in Bulgaria;
- 3) Defining the main focus of the film: is focused on the events of 1989, this is an important part of the film plot (the plot depends on this).
- 4) Defining the success: critical (film critics appraisal), international (festivals, awards, screenings outside Bulgaria), financial (broad audiences).

It should be noted that the topic *prehoda* is not the only consistent theme in post-communist cinema in Bulgaria. A number of films, such as *Mila ot Mars/Mila from Mars* (2004, Zornitsa Sophia), *Iztochni piesi/Eastern Plays* (2009, Kalev), *Avé* (Bojanov, 2011), *Slava/Glory* (2016, Grozeva & Valchanov), *Bezbog/Godless*

(2016, Petrova) deal directly and exclusively with the various problems that Bulgaria faces in the present. Nevertheless, the focus on the communist past and the transition can be identified as one of the dominant themes in Bulgarian new cinema.

In addition to the sampling criteria, this study employs a reflective approach that is sensitive to the feedback received in the focus groups discussions. For example, one of the films (*Mission London*) was included in response to the feedback acquired in the first focus groups as a film that is not directly thematically linked to *prehoda* but still plays a significant role in the discussions about it.

According to the above-mentioned criteria, the main body of films includes films that were created between 2008 and 2016, were dealing directly with the events of 1989 in their plot, and were successful both on the local level (popularity, financial success) and more globally (were presented at international festivals). This first group includes the following films:

1. *Tilt* (2011), Director: Viktor Chouchkov.

This film is a drama and a love story set in the early 1990s Bulgaria. Four friends dream to open their own bar called 'Tilt', a place that embodies their ideas of freedom and democracy. However, they face many problems, as Bulgaria in transition is still ruled by various gangs and corrupt ex-deputies. The friends encounter problems with the police and are forced to leave the country and immigrate to Germany.

2. *Operacia Shmenti Capeli/Operation Shmenti Capelli* (2011), Director: Ivan Mitov.

A drama film with elements of absurdist comedy. The title is an idiom that is used to characterise people who like to manipulate others by giving complicated and confusing orders. The director uses this phrase as a metaphor for people with considerable political power. The story itself is about two brothers, one of them is a corrupt gangster who uses his twin brother (an unemployed teacher) as a cover in his crimes.

3. *Tsvetat Na Hameleona/The Colour of the Chameleon* (2012), Director: Emil Hristov.

The film is another stylistic combination of a crime drama, spy movie and a comedy. The story is about an ex-police informant who recruits different people to spy on each other, creating an atmosphere of mutual fear and distrust. After 1989 he manages to use all the information that he knows from the Secret police to blackmail the government. This film is an exploration of the stereotypes and popular myths of the Bulgarian society about the Secret police and espionage in socialist Bulgaria.

4. *Dosieto Petrov/The Petrov File* (2015), Director: Georgi Balabanov.

This film also explores the theme of espionage and the secret police. During the last few years of communism in Bulgaria, a theatre actor, Alexander Petrov, is prohibited from acting for unknown reasons. After 1989 he finally finds out that his own best friend and mentor betrayed him. The main part of the film is set in 1994-1995, a time of severe fights between various bandit gangs and the corrupted government. Petrov leads a new political party and believes that he can change the future of Bulgaria by fighting the corrupt political powers.

5. *Viktoria* (2014), Director: Maya Vitkova.

The film tells a story of a woman, Boryana, who has a complicated relationship with her mother, Dima, and she is not eager to start her own family and have kids, her only dream is to escape Bulgaria and migrate to the US. Instead, she falls pregnant and, despite trying to cause abortion, gives birth to a relatively healthy baby girl who is, strangely, born without the umbilical cord. Not only was this baby born during the celebrations of the socialist revolution ('the official baby of the decade'), but also perceived as a 'baby of the future' that no longer needed to be linked to the mother to grow and develop. Because of that, the 'baby of the decade' is gifted with a new car and a brand new apartment by the Party. The baby also becomes a personal favourite of Todor Zhivkov who even sets up a phone line so that the two can always be in touch.

These films focus directly on the coup of 1989 and are concerned with the themes of secret police and espionage, the intrusion of the totalitarian state into the personal affairs and personal relations. The second group includes films that are either set in the present and dealing with the consequences of *prehoda* and the problems of the adaptation after Bulgaria joined the EU, or are set in more distant

past (Bulgaria between 1944 and 1989) or referring to the past and the legacies of communism in a more indirect way:

1. *Dzift/Zift* (2008), Director: Javor Gardev

A black-and-white film that combines neo-noir, criminal and black comedy with socialist realism features. The plot is based on a novel by Vladislav Todorov and tells a story of a guy nicknamed 'Zift' (meaning 'asphalt', or 'black pitch', once a popular chewing substance among the gangs in Sofia, the word is also claimed to be urban slang for shit). Chronologically the film covers the events of the communist coup of 1945 and the subsequent years of socialism in Bulgaria. Sofia is displayed as a noir city full of bizarre inhabitants and gangs.

2. *Svetat e Golyam / Spasenie Debne Otvsiaade/The World is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner* (2008), Director: Stephan Komandarev.

In a non-linear narrative plot, the film tells a story of a young Bulgarian family that leaves Bulgaria illegally in the 1980s. The married couple and their little son escape Bulgaria and spend some time in a refugee camp in Trieste before they finally are allowed to enter Germany. Fast forward around 20 years; they are involved in a car accident, where only the son, Sasho, survives but loses his memory. After learning the news, his grandfather travels to Germany from Bulgaria. Having seen the life that his grandson is leading (a tedious job, a small lifeless apartment), he convinces him to travel to Bulgaria by bike together, hoping that Sasho would regain his memory and remember who he was along the way.

3. *Misiya London/Mission London* (2010), Director: Dimitar Mitovski.

The film is a comedy based on a novel of the same name by Alek Popov, it is a European co-production with the UK, Hungary, Republic of Macedonia and Sweden. The plot develops in the Bulgarian embassy in London, where the newly appointed ambassador Varadin Dimitrov receives a very important task from the Bulgarian president's wife Devorina Selyanska to do everything in his power to invite the Queen of the UK to the concert organised to celebrate Bulgaria's accession to the EU. Varadin encounters a number of corrupt clerks, the Russian mafia, Scotland Yard detectives and other charismatic personas while trying to make sense of the anarchy that rules in the embassy. Varadin's only chance to contact the Queen

emerges when at a party he is introduced to a director of the agency who had contacts in the highest circles. However, as it turned out, he was a director of a doppelganger agency that provided celebrity lookalikes for parties and also, privately, to fulfil rich people's fantasies to sleep with someone famous.

4. *Dobriyat Poshtalion/The Good Postman* (2016), Director: Tonislav Hristov.

A semi-documentary film that follows the story of a postman Ivan who decides to run for mayor in order to bring life to the dying Bulgarian village near the Turkish border. His vision of the village's future is based on welcoming young families of refugees to the village, while his opponent relies on a populist anti-refugee discourse. The film reflects on the role of Bulgaria as a bridge between the East and the West and offers an interesting perspective of what life in rural Bulgaria looks like today and how it is affected by the refugee crisis.

The inclusion of these films is justified by their important role in the public discourse about *prehoda*. *Zift* and *The World is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner*, for example, were the first Bulgarian films made after 1989 to reach the Bulgarian box office top-20 (Bulgarian National Film Institute 2015). Both films have a wider historical scope, as they deal with the events of the communist time in Bulgaria rather than specifically with 1989. However, they not only re-introduced Bulgarian cinema to the audience but also initiated a wider debate about the legacy of communism. *The Good Postman*, on the other hand, was less popular in terms of the box office, but was quite often used as a background for discussions about immigration, the refugees, and Bulgaria's place in the EU.

After the first focus groups, it emerged that another film, *Mission London*, plays a vital role in the debates about new Bulgarian cinema and the transition. *Mission London* was also one of the most popular and successful new Bulgarian films, but initially, it was eliminated from the sample as a film based on the contemporary events. However, its plot also tackles the phenomena that play an important role in the debate around lustration and *prehoda* including migration (the wave of migration after 1989); lack of lustration (former members of the communist party still being in power and, more specifically, the presence of former communists among the Bulgarian diplomats); and national stereotypes and national identity in the European context.



## Interviews

Another relatively unpopular area of study covered in the current research is the link between what film directors imply and embed in their works and what audiences see in their work, and the extent to which the viewer, the reader and a text ‘converge’ (Iser, 1972) or ‘negotiate’ (Hall, 1980). This connection will be reconstructed with the help of interviews with the directors and the comparison with audience responses. The idea behind this combination of methods is not only to address the research questions, but also to use a model and a methodology that links media as an agency (cinema), authors (filmmakers that express their ideas through media), and audience (those who perceive media and are also individual memory bearers). This approach could also help see the development of media memory in dynamics, trace the process of collective memory shaping and the way that the present and the past are always in close association with each other (the past influences the present, as well as the present changes the perception of the past).

Semi-structured interviews with the directors of the several selected films allow evaluating their understanding of the role of cinema in representing history. The interviews were conducted with some of the directors that are now active in the new Bulgarian cinema and have produced films that deal with the theme of *prehoda* directly or indirectly. Even though a big number of directors have been contacted, not all of them responded or went through with the interview due to their complicated schedules and other work commitments.

Overall, I managed to conduct six semi-structured interviews with film directors, either by Skype, or in person, during my trips to Bulgaria. Interviews were conducted with the Bulgarian filmmakers, including the directors of the three of the case study films – Javor Gardev (*Zift*), Victor Chouchkov (*Tilt*), Georgi Balabanov (*Petrov File*). Other interviews have been conducted with Georgi Hristov (the director of a recent film *Losers*), Iglika Trifonova (her latest film being *The Prosecutor Defender Father and His Son*) and the director of the documentary *The Beast is Still Alive* – Mina Mileva.

Additionally, in August 2016, I attended the 34th festival of the Bulgarian feature film ‘Golden Rose’ in Varna, Bulgaria, where I was accredited to participate in all press conferences and discussions. This allowed me to collect more data for my film analysis. In May 2017 I attended several screenings and events related to new

Bulgarian cinema in Sofia, including screenings at the Sofia Film Festival for Students, Bloc Kino initiative, and KineDok festival. I also attended the London premiere of the film *Posoki* by Stephan Komandarev, and recorded the Q&A section with the director after the screening. Another interview was conducted with the programming director of the independent cinema The House of Cinema – Hristo Hristosov. Hristosov was one of the organisers of the initiatives involving the screening of *The Good Postman* in collaboration with *The Refugee Project* initiative.

The interviews included (but were not limited to) questions about contemporary and old Bulgarian cinema, the events of *prehoda* and their depiction in cinema, the use of cinematic representation for coping with cultural trauma, the role of cinema in mediating collective memories. There were also some director-specific questions that dealt with the particular themes covered in the given film.

### **Focus groups**

The interaction between the media and audience in relation to collective memory will be covered in the following chapters as an area less explored in previous research. This connection is evaluated by conducting focus-groups with the audience. Such analysis provides information about the two significant aspects of media memory: the role of media in collective memory about the post-1989 events and the effectiveness of media (cinema) as a tool for creating and encouraging a dialogue about the past.

In order to encourage a dialogue, particular scenes from the films were chosen for the screenings. The first and most important criteria was the idea that certain scenes could be perceived as controversial or deal with a contested topic, and, therefore, inspire a discussion. Secondly, these scenes had to be self-sufficient, meaning that they could be understood without the context and, thus, even the participants who have not seen the whole film could still be included in the conversation. Three main extracts were chosen to initiate a discussion on each of the three topics: 1) Bulgarian national identity before and after 1989; 2) 1989 and the legacy of *prehoda*; 3) Post-communist nostalgia.

The first topic was facilitated by an extract from *The World* where Bai Dan breaks into the German hospital where his grandson Sasho is recovering from the car accident. This scene seems to represent a clash between the East (embodied by

the loud and almost violent Bai Dan) and the West (embodied by the structured sterile life in the hospital). The topic of national identity was also discussed in the context of *Mission London*, a film that deals mainly with the satirizing of the Bulgarian diaspora in London. The topic of *prehoda* was facilitated with the help of a scene from *Shmenti Capelli* that illustrates the corrupt nature of the post-1989 transition in Bulgaria by unpacking the immediate aftermath of the coup. Post-communist nostalgia was discussed in the context of the opening scene of *The World*, a flashback to the 1970s Bulgaria, when Sasho was born. The contestation of collective memory about the communist past is represented in this scene by the contrast between the factual difficulties of that time (including food rationing) and the rose-tinted depiction of the safety, security and the sense of community in the small town of Karlovo.

The focus group method seems to be the most suitable for this research, as focus groups generate information about attitudes, beliefs and reactions of a group rather than individuals, while the group dynamics reveal the process of collective memory shaping (Gibbs, 1997). Another advantage of this method for the present research is that a focus group can reveal the degree of consensus on a particular topic (film and the representations of *prehoda*) (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993). Focus group method is also often used to measure the response of the audience to media messages (Kitzinger, 1994 & 1995).

Overall, six focus groups were conducted in order to obtain diverse information from various demographic groups, including four focus groups in Sofia (the capital), one focus group in the village Knyazhevo in the suburbs of Sofia, and one focus group in the small town Gorna Oryahovitsa. Each group was constructed to represent a particular (but broad) age group, including one group with young people under the age of 25, two groups with a more varied mix of participants (ages varying from 28 to 44), and three groups with more senior participants aged from 60 to 78.

The number of participants in the groups varied but did not exceed four participants in one group to provide more opportunity for each participant to speak up. Overall, the study included 17 participants. These mini focus groups granted access to audiences of various backgrounds and ages, as well as people with different attitudes towards the contemporary Bulgarian cinema. The questions that were discussed covered such topics as the legacy of *prehoda* in Bulgaria, the role of the Bulgarian cinema in telling history, the differences in generations and their

perception of both the events of *prehoda* and its outcomes, the negotiations of national identity after 1989 and the nostalgic attitudes towards the past.

### **Data analysis of focus groups and interviews**

Thematic analysis, the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to process the data obtained from the focus groups and interviews. This method allows evaluation of the negotiation of collective memory about 1989 mediated by new Bulgarian cinema. An analysis of the interaction of themes extracted from all three types of data is aimed at enhancing the reliability and validity of this study. Thematic analysis also provides a certain theoretical framework flexibility, allowing the combination of the results obtained from various methods (Braun & Clarke, 2012: 56). The themes were suggested by the initial film analysis and then were embedded in the interview and focus group questions.

The wide variety of topics that were to some extent tackled in the films meant that the discussions were generalised and narrowed down to three main aspects, including the themes of national identity, history and memory, and post-communist nostalgia. More specifically, the research tackles the sub-themes of the intercultural negotiation through the aspects of the changing national identity, migration, and globalization; the dominant and counter-hegemonic readings of the past and the interplay between the official and vernacular memories; and the critical potential of post-communist nostalgia and its role in coming to terms with the past. These specific themes were analysed in the films, the interviews and the focus groups, and the results of all three methods were integrated theme-by-theme.

### 1.5. Ethical Considerations and Reflections

This section briefly looks at some of the risks and concerns that could arise during the fieldwork of this research. Firstly, I list the general concerns when dealing with potentially sensitive topics such as memory and trauma. Secondly, the specific measures taken to tackle the risks of the participants and the researcher are discussed.

#### **Specific ethical considerations and risk assessment**

A research is generally considered 'sensitive' if it 'potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it' (Lee, 1993), while it is important to note that this definition implies that a 'threat' is not an essential feature of a given 'sensitive topic', but rather can emerge at any stage of the project (from data collection to data storage and dissemination) (Y. Lee & R. Lee, 2012). Some researchers propose to substitute the notion of 'threat' by that of 'risk' as a more conceptually acceptable alternative (Y. Lee & R. Lee, 2012).

Lee argues that there are at least three major issues that can be considered as a precondition of a 'sensitive' research: issues considered private (sexuality, death), issues connected to stigmatization and social norms (illegal behaviour) and issues indicating a potential political or social conflict threat (Lee, 1993).

The present research deals with the collective memory of the events of 1989 in Bulgaria and the following transition towards democracy. Even though I am dealing mostly with collective and generalised memories or cinematic representations, the risk of evoking some painful personal emotions and memories was considered. There is a possibility that some of the participants might have been personally affected by the regime or by the transition.

#### **Protecting the participants**

As a researcher, I am aware of the importance of protecting all the parties involved in the research, including the participants (interviewees and the participants of the focus groups) and the researcher. This paragraph explains how the issues of protecting the participants in the research were resolved.

Two main issues should be considered here: the language of the research and the nature of the questions. As all the interviews and focus groups were conducted in Bulgarian and then translated into English, the informants were able to use their native language. My position as a native speaker and a person who is familiar with the cultural context of the informants helped minimise the possible barriers to communication.

Safety protection includes any possible immediate or delayed negative impact on the participant. Two techniques proposed by Lee for working with sensitive topics are 'dejeopardising' (distancing specific responses from the respondent's identity) and 'desensitising' (creating a climate of frankness and trust) (Lee, 1993). Therefore, there are two primary goals: to provide a transparent procedure of anonymising the data (in case of focus groups) and to create a safe space for the participants. Anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed by decoding the names of the participants after the focus groups. Data was stored on a hard drive in a locked drawer in my office. Another copy of the data was stored safely on my personal computer in a password-protected folder. The interviews with film directors were not anonymous, and the participants were aware of that. However, if any of the interviewees wanted to remain anonymous, he or she was assigned a pseudonym. After the interviews, each participant will be given a copy of the transcript for verification.

A number of actions were taken to provide a safe environment for the participants. Each of the participants was provided with an information sheet with the details of the research and contact information of the researcher. Each of the participants had to sign a written consent form. To sustain a safe environment for the participants, I focused on treating the respondents carefully, constantly being aware of any signals of tension, distress or discomfort in the group. The participants were given an opportunity to leave whenever they felt too overwhelmed or emotional. The proposed 'dejeopardising' technique was carried out through allowing the participants to relate to the past through the medium of the film extracts rather than through direct questions about their experiences. The focus groups comprised participants of various backgrounds, including descendants of former communist party members and anti-communist activists. Through watching the film and discussing the extracts as a group, they had the freedom to choose the level of openness and disclosure themselves. The mediated experience of film-watching

granted a certain level of distancing from personal experiences while also allowing to relate to the experiences of the characters through a personal perspective.

In her research of focus groups with women with enduring mental health problems Owen raises a number of concerns and provides useful recommendations for researchers working with vulnerable respondents (Owen, 2001). One of the major concerns is that of the emotional involvement of the researcher and whether he/she adopts an 'insider' or 'outsider' stance to the participants. Owen recommends to sustain a 'friendly, warm distance, whilst at the same time remaining slightly detached' (2001). This attitude would also allow maintaining an appropriate for this research balance between research and group therapy.

Another concern is that of dealing with group interaction correctly. Since group dynamics is an essential part of the focus group method, it is vital to encourage the discussions between the participants rather than asking direct questions. However, it might be useful to intervene sometimes in order to encourage the quieter participants to contribute to the discussion. Generally, group dynamics should be considered as an advantage in terms of facilitating group discussions and mutual encouragement rather than an obstacle (Lynch, 2007). For instance, Kitzinger and Wilkinson (2004) have argued that focus groups might be effective in studying 'sensitive' topics, enabling participants to 'gain mutual comfort and reassurance' (2000: 45).

### **Safety of the researcher**

My position as a researcher within the cultural context of the research could be considered as dual, simultaneously an insider and outsider. Such position offers its benefits in the form of more open access to varied cultural contexts but also poses some challenges. Having left Bulgaria at a very young age and being raised in another post-communist country, Belarus, before moving to the UK, I should acknowledge my somewhat vulnerable in-between position. Dealing with the topic of national identity and migration and exposing my role as an insider/outsider during the focus groups might pose some risk of a traumatic identity re-evaluation. While it is impossible to avoid the exposure to these sensitive topics, I aim to remain mindful of them and will deal with them by introducing de-briefing sessions with trusted colleagues or friends, and allowing for reasonable breaks between the focus groups, their transcription, and analysis.

It should be added that this research holds relatively few physical risks for the researcher, as it does not require travelling to any particularly dangerous or remote locations. I have lived in Bulgaria and visited it very often; I am also familiar with both cities where the research will take place. The few safety concerns were minimised by the nomination procedure (most of the participants were nominated by the people I know personally). The focus groups and interviews took place in public spaces, and at least two people were aware of my location and the time of each focus group and interview.



## Chapter 2: Background and Context: Remembering Communism and the Transition

### 2.1. Introduction: The Collapse of Communism, 1989-1991

This chapter looks at the political, economic and social context of *prehoda*. I also discuss some of the key ethnic tensions that emerged in the late years of the regime's existence and continued to have impact on Bulgaria's national identity after 1989. Finally, the politics of remembering are discussed in the context of the collective memory about communism and the interpretations of the fall of the regime and the subsequent transition.

1989 was the year of drastic changes in Europe when pressures for national independence led to a wave of revolutions in the countries of the Eastern Bloc. Severe internal problems, including the economic stagnation, pressure by the United States, and the arms race during the late years of the Cold War led to a significant weakening of the Soviet Union in the 1980s. The leader of the Soviet Union since 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev, introduced the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* (Gorbachev, 1988) which induced the reforms towards liberalisation, social, political and economic transformations in the Eastern Block. With the gradual fall of the Iron Curtain, the Western influence became more and more powerful through the cultural impact of foreign films, music, and fashion. Inevitably, this led to more freedom and expectations for democracy, especially among young people (Roberts, 1991). In response, Gorbachev made some steps towards demilitarisation and started gradually putting an end to the arms race with the US. The decrease of the Soviet military presence in the countries of the Eastern bloc became one of the preconditions of the 1989 revolutions in the region. On 9 November 1989, the Berlin Wall fell symbolising the reunion of the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany.

Meanwhile, in Bulgaria, the political unrest started with the environmentalist demonstrations against the building the Belene Nuclear Power Plant organised by the Independent Society of Ecoglasnost in October and November 1989. Further, the protests transformed into a general public campaign for political reforms. On 10 November 1989, the day after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Bulgaria's long-serving leader Todor Zhivkov was ousted by his Politburo. The first free elections since 1931

took place in 1990 and the Bulgarian Socialist Party won. A new constitution was adopted in 1991 (Blejer & Skreb, 2001).

It should be noted that, although the fall of the communist regime in Bulgaria coincided with the protest waves in the other Eastern European states, the transition of power in November 1989 remained relatively peaceful. In particular, compared to the collapse of the regime in Romania which is still considered the most violent transition among all countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Unrest in Timișoara continued for five days and was followed by riots in Bucharest. The leader of the country Ceaușescu repeatedly used violent methods to suppress the demonstrations, resulting in mass deaths and injuries among the protesters. Unlike its northern neighbour, Romania, Bulgaria managed to go through the fall of the regime without major violence or riots. As Maria Todorova notes, the fall of the regime resembled a palace coup rather than a revolution: 'In Bulgaria, 1989 is popularly known, in a typically anticlimactic fashion, not as revolution, but as "the change" (*promianata*), much like the German *Die Wende*' (2009).

The problematic aftermath of the transition revealed itself just after the overthrow, and the following decades appeared to be even more challenging for the Bulgarian economy and politics. Not surprisingly, the 'shock therapy' strategy applied immediately after the collapse of the regime, resulted in a period of instability in most of the former communist countries. After the events of 1989 in Europe, the Bulgarian political, economic and social spheres entered a period of instability and uncertainty. The 'palace coup' in November 1989 inevitably led to an extended period of new government establishment and required an adjustment to the rules of market economy and keeping up with the other European states at a quite fast pace. It is safe to say that for at least two decades post-communist Bulgaria was characterised by constant political and economic crises.

## 2.2. Bulgaria in Transition: The Political Context

It is not surprising and not unique to Bulgaria that the aftermath of the 1989 changes still significantly influence the political climate in the country. The transition from one political system to another was drastic and yet surprisingly anticlimactic. *Prehoda* in Bulgaria was not a revolution in the sense of violent protests and clashes with the government, rather, it was led by 'the highest functionaries of the regime

who were prompted to action by events both inside and outside Bulgaria, and who probably acted with Soviet approval' (Crampton, 2007: 9).

The transitional process itself was not only triggered but also almost exclusively managed by the members of the Bulgarian Communist Party who organised roundtable discussions with some selected members of the opposition. It can be noted that, even though several quite popular demonstrations took place in Sofia in the early 1990s, the shift of power in the government remained unclear and lacked transparency. Three major political forces dominated the political field, including the *BSP* (Bulgarian Socialist Party, the former Bulgarian Communist Party), the *UDF* (United Democratic Forces under the leadership of Zheliu Zhelev) and, later on, the *MRF* (the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) under the leadership of Akhmed Dogan).

Overall, a strong tendency towards political coalitions can still be observed in Bulgaria's political life today. The multiparty system that emerged in the early 1990s' Bulgaria continued to grow and diversify through the years. Today, the political leanings of the political parties in Bulgaria differ from the radically right-wing to various degrees of centrism and leftism. One obvious problem in the classification of the political leanings lies in the gap between the often populist rhetoric used by the parties and the actual policies that are being, or not being, implemented. The issue with the political programmes after 1989 was not only in the fact that their discourses were very similar and all revolved around the ideas of democratization and the free market, but rather, the main problem was the lack of actual changes and the delayed and uneven nature of the transition in Bulgaria (Dimitrov, 2013). As an inevitable result of this political ambiguity, the Bulgarian electorate gradually lost trust in the political forces and, generally, did not show a high level of loyalty towards any political movement in particular. As Dimitrov further suggests, in the Bulgarian case this resulted in the 'high level of distrust in the political parties, and a level of electoral volatility much higher than those seen in established democracies' (2013: 66).

This electoral volatility and the lack of trust is supported by the general disbelief in the system that is perceived as flawed. The major flaws of the Bulgarian transition towards democracy can be identified as corruption and the continuity of political elites (Crampton, 2007). Even though the essential required elements of democracy indeed exist in Bulgaria and the transition itself was carried out in a non-violent way,

corruption remains a serious problem in the region. It appears that the severity of the problem was exacerbated by the lack of transparency and the 'economic chaos' (Crampton, 2007: 97) that ruled the country after the privatisation reforms. The continuity of power is an issue directly linked to the same reasons, and, as Crampton notes, we can observe an 'autonomization and separation of economic elites' (2007: 98). Thus, it can be argued that the political transition in Bulgaria was not only problematic but also entirely inconsistent. While on the surface, the primary essential characteristics of democracy are present, several factors remain problematic.

Another important characteristic of the post-communist political climate in Bulgaria today is its extreme polarisation. One of the main reasons for that lies in the historically different discourses surrounding the left and the right in post-communist Bulgaria. It is necessary to note that, in comparison with the Western notions of political left and right, the use of these terms by the modern Bulgarian parties appears inconsistent. After 1989, the major ideological divide in the Bulgarian political landscape has been developing around the confrontation between the former communists and the democratic opposition. This divide has led to a strong association of the former nomenklatura with the 'left' and the democratic (and EU-leaning) forces with the 'right'. Gradually, the divide has been exploited further by the dominant parties who transitioned from promoting liberal values to what has now become a conservative far-right ideology. Reinforcing the East/West divide even further, all pro-European parties, therefore, are automatically considered as anti-communist and right-centrist (EuroZine, 2017). This conceptual ambiguity became a new norm in the Bulgarian politics, where populist and conservative parties have been gaining more and more support.

To be more specific, the parties represented in the current Parliament in 2018 reveal a lot about the recent shifts in the political climate in Bulgaria. They include *GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria)*, pro-European but also conservative and right-centrist, *Bulgarian Socialist Party* (centre-left), *Movement for Rights and Freedoms* (centrist), *Will* (right-wing populism, right-centrist), and the *United Patriots* (an alliance formed by *IMRO – Bulgarian National Movement* (right-wing, Bulgarian nationalism), *National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria* (right-wing, Bulgarian nationalism), and *Attack* (far-right, Bulgarian nationalism)). It is crucial to add that out of these eight parties, at least five are promoting radical nationalist

views and are not hesitant in using extreme xenophobic rhetoric. The very names of these movements are very aggressive (*Attack, Will*) and suggesting that the Bulgarian nation needs to be saved from any foreign influence. Another important implication of such radicalisation is that these parties are extremely non-inclusive and most of them refer to the traditional Bulgarian values through the prism of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and are, therefore, openly anti-Islamic.

Furthermore, it becomes evident that in the present conditions, there are no real alternatives to the right-wing political dominance, since all leftist parties including the *Green Party of Bulgaria* and *The Bulgarian Left* parties are struggling in distancing themselves from the old communist party and the corruption associated with it (Open Democracy, 2014). It can be argued that, without ignoring the worldwide trends of radicalisation and rise of populism, the political forces in Bulgaria are still shaped and affected by the political divide during the early days of the transition. Most parties that remain in power now are distancing themselves from being associated with communism, while also pro-Europeanness has become an umbrella term for conservative and sometimes radical nationalist views. Not only have the consequences of power led to a lack of trust towards politics in general, it has also created a dramatic left-right divide establishing even less opportunity for an alternative.

### 2.3. Social and Economic Transition

On the macro level, the early economic transition up to 1997 in Bulgaria was characterised by the following key features – a significant decline of the GDP, a delayed economic reform, and a number of economic crises. The magnitude of the economic decline can be evaluated now through the decline of the GDP which ‘fell to 63% of its 1989 level’ (Mihov, 1999: 2). It was not until the Kostov government in 1997 when, finally, the stabilisation reforms in 1997 proved to be more successful (Mihov, 1999).

The impact of such an economic transition on the society has also been quite dramatic in many aspects. Firstly, the economic transition was characterised by a drastic decline in social welfare. The dramatic fall in the average income is linked to the high inflation levels that naturally affected the wages and social benefits in the country.

The groups that were hit most severely were those with no independent sources of income and/or low personal 'entitlements' such as access to education, social transfers or public goods. [...] Public sector employees experienced severe drops in income, 49% in the case of education and 47.6% in the case of health (Mihov, 1999: 62).

The most affected groups, therefore, were the most vulnerable prior to the transition, including the pensioners and the Roma minorities. Another large vulnerable group was those who worked in the public sector and particularly in education and healthcare.

The evident negative impact of the transition on the financial status of an average household was exacerbated by the other two factors which were virtually absent previously in socialist Bulgaria – the rise of inequality and unemployment. The transformations in the private and public sectors of the economy resulted in a further class fragmentation in society which naturally appeared to be a shock to the system for a former socialist country. Another issue that emerged after the fall of the regime that the Bulgarian people were not prepared for was the large-scale unemployment (Mihov, 1999).

Not surprisingly, the uncertain economic climate in Bulgaria immediately after the fall of the regime resulted in some significant transformations in the social sphere. One of the key demographic issues emerging after 1989 can be described as a steady decline in population, caused mostly by two major factors: a decline in birth rates and a rise in emigration. It can be argued that both factors can be attributed to the lack of economic stability in the country. In terms of emigration, the first wave comprised ethnic Turkish minorities who left the country after 1989, but later on, younger economic emigrants left the country to pursue financial stability (Dimitrov, 2001: 59 - 64). While many Eastern European countries demonstrated the same increase in emigration rates after the fall of the communist regimes, it is important to note the scale of the emigration wave in Bulgaria:

To appreciate the impact of emigration on popular consciousness, one has to bear in mind that Bulgaria has had no history of large-scale emigration of ethnic Bulgarians since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and therefore the wave of emigration after 1989 has been a little short of a national tragedy (Dimitrov, 2001: 60).

Both factors, namely, the steady decline in birth rates and an increase in emigration, resulted in a problematic and overly dramatised public discourse about a death of the nation, making emigration a sensitive topic not only in politics but also in the general public discourse, including in cinema and the arts. To sum up, the three above-mentioned primary factors, namely a decline in the economic development, political instability and corruption, and a wave of emigration, have created a profoundly cynical and pessimistic stance in Bulgarian society, not only regarding the transition itself but also the future of Bulgaria in the EU. *Prehoda* has not only been problematic and lacking transparency, but it also appears to be quite traumatic in terms of the collective perception of the changes.

## 2.4. European Identity and Ethnic Minorities

Another aspect of the transition is the complex interaction between the nativist (Slavic, orthodox) and pro-Western (pro-European) tendencies in national identity manifestations after the fall of the communist rule. Fully acknowledging the abrupt nature of the 1989 changes, I would like to emphasise the more long-term historical roots of the tensions between these two orientations towards the East or the West in Bulgaria.

During the communist rule, the ethnic minorities in Bulgaria could be identified as either recognised 'visible minorities', including the Turkish and the Roma, or the 'invisible minorities', such as the Macedonians and the Pomaks<sup>1</sup>, who were 'denied recognition' (Naxidou, 2012: 85). Undoubtedly, all categories of ethnic minorities in Bulgaria suffered certain levels of discrimination, both under the communist rule and after the fall of the regime. The policies of assimilation of the Turkish minority, for instance, can be seen as an example of consistent discrimination that took place throughout the communist rule and continued after the fall of the regime. As Eminov notes:

During the early years of Communist rule, they were 'socialist Turks' who were said to share more with the 'Bulgarian socialist nation' than with their brethren outside the country. During the 1970s, and increasingly during the

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<sup>1</sup> Pomaks is a term used to describe the Slavic Muslim minority inhabiting Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. In Bulgaria, the Pomaks are generally denied a status of an ethnic minority because they are generally considered Bulgarian by ethnicity, and Muslim by religion (Naxidou 2012, Fatme 2014).

1980s, they were 'Bulgarians' who had somehow discovered their authenticity under the 'revival process' (1999: 55).

The Revival Process was a highly problematic forced assimilation campaign imposed on the Turkish minorities in Bulgaria by the communist party. The campaign, which was launched in 1984 and continued until 1989 forbade the use of Turkish (and Muslim) names and entailed repressions in the form of prosecution and imprisonment for those who refused to comply with it (Grosescu, 2017). It is clear, therefore, that the ethnic tensions within Bulgaria have not emerged after the fall of the regime, but are rooted in the long history of ethnic struggle in the region. It should be noted, however, that such events as *prehoda* and the subsequent accession into the EU triggered some new aspects in the way that the minorities are treated in Bulgaria.

In the context of the Bulgarian accession into the EU and the constant struggle to prove that Bulgaria is a truly European country, Bulgarian national identity is often built on the contrast with the 'barbarian' East. The aim of such a contrast is to create a divide differentiating Bulgaria from the non-European Other, which, in the case of Bulgaria in most general terms is the Orient: 'Bulgarian xenophobes present themselves and Bulgaria as Europe's last bulwark against Islam' (Perry, 1995: 62). It can be argued that national identity is constructed through comparison and contrasting to either larger entities (Europe, East, West) or minorities (Other), such as Roma, Turkish minorities, and recently the refugees from the Middle East.

The new national ideas are built on 'distancing both the individual self and the "national self" from practices and traits that are considered un-European, while adopting such that are considered European' (Pilbrow, 1997: 65), and one of the mechanisms of such distancing is the process of marginalising the minorities that could be stereotypically orientalistised as 'un-European' (Pilbrow, 1997: 62). This could also be explained by the constant fears of the necessity of 'national survival' or preservation of national identity already mentioned above, a discourse often used in the public sphere to evoke the memories of the assimilation politics during communism, or even earlier, the assimilation of the Bulgarian nationalism by the Ottoman empire (Rechel, 2008). As a result of the constant perception of an outside threat, the concept of nationalism in the states of the Balkan region emerged as an antagonising, rather than a unifying force (Fatme, 2012; White, 2000).



## 2.5. The *Failed Transition* and Its Consequences

The notion of collective or cultural trauma in this research refers to a socially constructed reaction to an event that is believed by society to be traumatogenic. According to Alexander's theory of cultural trauma, no event can be traumatic in its essence, but rather an event can be perceived as traumatic by a particular group of people (Alexander, 2004). I argue that the events of 1989 affected national identity of Bulgaria and led to a deep cultural shock, which stimulated the narrative of a traumatic, delayed, or failed transition (Minchev, 2013; Dobrinsky 2000; Dimitrov, 2001; Open Democracy, 2013; Debating Europe, 2015).

The most commonly used notions describing the transition are those of failure, vagueness, unfinished business and delay. Now, three decades after the fall of the regime in Bulgaria, there are still reasons to believe that *prehoda* is not over. The discourse around *prehoda* often acknowledges belatedness as its key characteristic. The most obvious example of such belatedness is the delayed economic reforms in Bulgaria. As Gotchev argues, there are at least two main explanations for the delay – first, is the initial economic backwardness of Bulgaria in comparison with the other Eastern and Central European countries, and second, the ineffective management of the reforms: 'Since 1990 the transition in Bulgaria has been managed by five different governments with diverging objectives' (1999: 95).

Nevertheless, the discourse of a belated transition in Bulgaria goes far beyond the economic explanations. Now, this perception is so entrenched in the public discourse that has become connected to the social, cultural, and even symbolical domain. For example, the following article points out the belatedness as the vital characteristic of the transition in Bulgaria in quite a metaphoric way instead of operating with economic figures citing the poet and former anti-Communist opposition leader Edvin Sugarev: 'Twenty years have passed and we are in still the middle of the desert. Moreover, we will be waiting for another 20 years' (*NY Times*, 2009).

Mainly, it is believed that the problematic nature of the transition was caused by the relentless politicisation of the economic sphere, which, in the context of a lack of any consistent decommunisation efforts, led to the continuity of the elites and corruption at high levels of the government. The lack of lustration along with the lack

of open public debates on the issue, according to many public figures, was the primary factor that contributed to the 'failed' transition in Bulgaria. As Minchev suggests, the decommunisation process in Bulgaria was 'underrated and omitted' (Sofia Platform, 2016).

In this context, this thesis is contributing to the process of engaging with the past, understanding it better and, hopefully, adding nuance to the discussion about *prehoda* as a belated failure. If, indeed, any transition is problematic and unclear by definition, then, perhaps, the discourses of critique surrounding it can be indicative of some senses of loss and lacking, or nostalgia about the past rather than being exclusively about *prehoda* itself. The problematic use of the discourses of failure and belatedness lies in the fact that it does not encourage a more balanced, critical engagement with the past.

## 2.6. Remembering Communism and the Transition in Bulgaria

Another crucial aspect that affects the public discourse around the transition is the fact that there are still polarised views regarding the meaning of the events and their impact on today's society. While there is a certain public agreement on what happened in 1989 and immediately after, the society is still polarised in its attempts to evaluate the past in a meaningful way. Today, people who have experienced these events and those who learned about them through history books, films and personal stories of the witnesses, face the challenge projected by heterogeneous interpretations of history. Each country of the former Eastern bloc finds its own effective interpretation of history, some successfully building their new European identity on it, others still struggling to come to terms with it. The differences in these interpretations define the focus of remembering, the ideology of processing the past and the agenda of the public discussions even now.

I would argue then, that it was not that the transition itself 'failed', even if delayed and belated in many respects including economy and politics, but the most problematic outcome was the failure to come out of the 'hermeneutic wars' and engage with the past in a meaningful way. Nevertheless, there are several attempts, mostly informal, that were more successful. This section will take a look at some of the formal and informal practices of decommunisation and will aim to evaluate their role in the process of coming to terms with the past.

The official process of decommunisation in Europe started shortly after the fall of communism and was aimed mainly at dismantling the policies of the regime, as well as investigating its crimes. Political methods of decommunisation included trials, purges in legislation, and revelations of archives. Committees and groups were established in order to evaluate the aftermath of the regime: *The Office for the Documentation and Investigation of the Crimes of Communism* in the Czech Republic, *Commission of Inquiry for the Assessment of History and Consequences of the SED Dictatorship* in Germany, *Institute of National Remembrance* in Poland, *Nation's Memory Institute* in Slovakia). Simultaneously, a number of laws were introduced to deal with the crimes of the communist government and the secret police, such as, for example, *Law on Declaring the Criminal Nature of the Communist Regime* in Bulgaria.

Various actions have been taken with regards to the secret police archives in Poland, Germany, Czech Republic, and Hungary, where citizens could obtain partial or full access to the files of the secret police. In Bulgaria, the opening of the archives of the *National Security (Darzhavna Sigurnost)* was delayed, and the state was accused of clearing up the most controversial files. It was not until 2007 when the secret files were handed over to an independent commission, and the processing of the files continues today. Some critics blame the problematic transition in Bulgaria on the belated revealing of the secret police files, which covered many crimes of the regime and allowed to erase much controversial evidence (DS.bg, 2012). While the lack of transparency could be one of the factors impacting the political disengagement of Bulgarian society, it should be acknowledged that a meaningful and effective assessment of the past is possible not only through formal channels. An essential role in promoting the need for opening the archives belongs to an independent web project *Darzhavna Sigurnost.com*, a website that collected all available information about the process. Several other informal processes emerged as a substitute to the official institutions of remembering, including the 'Silent lustration' practices (Horne, 2015) and the reflection on the transitional process in the arts and media.

## 2.7. The 'Silent lustration'

Lustration as a decommunisation process has been widely criticised as a practice that violates constitutional law and promotes the notion of a collective, instead of individual, blame (Helsinki Watch, 1993). In particular, Helsinki Watch criticised the

controversial Panev Law introduced in Bulgaria in the early 1990s as the first attempt to introduce lustration policies in Bulgaria. The law was deemed problematic for its focus on the presumption of guilt for anyone who worked in the public sphere under the regime, including higher education (Helsinki Watch, 1993).

The Panev Law was cancelled in March 1995, and it took quite a long time for a new version of an anti-communist law to be developed. Ellis suggests that even though lustration laws are always controversial, there is a need for some type of decommunisation process nevertheless (1996). In the Bulgarian case, as Ellis notes, this process was blocked for another five years, mostly by the former members of the Bulgarian Communist Party who remained in power now as members of the reformed Bulgarian Socialist Party (Ellis, 1996).

An alternative law that condemned the criminal character of communism was adopted in May 2000 under the name of the *Law to Declare the Communist Regime in Bulgaria Criminal*. The Law declares that the BCP party has led Bulgaria to a 'national tragedy', leading to 'a moral and economic decline of the state' (Law on Declaring the Criminal Nature of the Communist Regime in Bulgaria, 2000). In 2007, a special *Dossier Committee* was formed to work on securing unrestricted access to the files of the Secret Police archives. The committee started working on verifying the files and opening them to the public. Even though the opening of the files did not have any legal consequences for those involved with the State Security, Horne argues that this revelation triggered an alternative process of 'informal lustration' (2015: 131).

At the same time, the official attempts at lustration have not only been delayed but also widely criticised. For instance, Ellis argues that there is a need for a more informal way of coming to terms with the past in order to avoid the dominance of the political over the judicial that is unavoidable during lustration (1996). Horne, in her analysis of the decommunisation processes in Bulgaria and Romania, argues that in these countries, an alternative, 'silent' lustration has been taking place instead of a formal legislative one (2015).

Not only is the opening of the archives finally challenging the lack of transparency of the whole transitional process, but it is also triggering a more open public engagement with the topic that has been avoided by the officials for so long. The role of opening the archives is mostly symbolic, but this, as Horne argues, does not

diminish its power in the process of coming to terms with the past (2015). The potential of such 'silent' lustration, thus, lies not in its ability to create a discourse of blame, but rather encourage self-censure and wider public engagement with the archives and the topic of *prehoda* in general. This suggests that the informal strategies of engaging with the communist past might be as effective and even more humanising than official policies of lustration, even though in the Bulgarian case, they only emerged in the period 2006-2008, indicating quite a significant delay.

## 2.8. Remembering Communism: Arts and Informal Initiatives

Interestingly, the period of an increase in public engagement with the communist past in the mid and late 2000s in Bulgaria also coincides with some other informal initiatives and reflections about communism in public discourse, the arts, education, and cinema. This inability of the government to come to terms with its past has been widely reflected in Bulgarian cinema of the past few years. For example, *The Colour of the Chameleon* (2012) depicts the main character, an ex-police informant, who eventually creates his own archive of state secrets to blackmail the government. This film is an interesting representation of myths and conspiracy theories that exist in Bulgaria today, as it reflects on the atmosphere of fear, mutual distrust and the phenomena of 'donos', the habit of writing reports and denunciations. The film *Zift* (2008) also depicts the problems of a total distrust in the society where nobody can be sure if the person one has to deal with is actually an agent of the secret police.

However, even a more timely and successful elimination of the political legacy of communism could not erase this period from collective memory. The communist regime, of course, has left its marks on the very mechanisms of remembering. In a totalitarian<sup>2</sup> state, politics infused multiple aspects of social life, making everything from family and personal affairs to culture and education truly political. At the same time, this infusion of secrecy made the process of remembering fragmented and even schizophrenic. This dominance of the political made it almost essential to seek ways of apolitical, private, personalised remembering.

Indeed, in a society predetermined by the doctrines of the party, official history could be nothing else but straightforward and linear. However, quite understandably, people under the regime still had their chaotic everyday life experiences, conflicting with the dictated truths. Therefore, the conflict between official rules and actual experience of memory predetermines the indirect, vague, nonlinear and genuinely diverse ways of remembering under the communist regime. This to some extent explains the importance of visual means of remembering in post-1989 Europe, such as museums, architecture, and cinema. As Sarkisova and Apor state: 'Using the

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<sup>2</sup> This notion is a problematic one, as scholars (for example, see Fitzpatrick 2000, Hough 1976, Thurston 1998) still argue if it is appropriate to apply it to the former Soviet and satellite states. Being aware of this debates, I use this term to stress the way that the political domain infiltrated such deeply personal spheres of social life as personal and collective memory.

mimetic “authenticity effect”, the moving images construct the stories which work towards gradually reshaping the image(s) of the past’ (2008: 34).

Symbolic acts and the use of visually striking images was to some extent a method often attributed to the Soviet propaganda, as well as to any other propaganda. Thus, it seems natural that the deconstruction of communist discourse was carried out as a response to those visual images. One of the most vivid examples of reconstructing collective memory in Bulgaria is the demolition of ideological buildings and monuments.



*Figure 2 – Demolition of the Georgi Dimitrov Mausoleum, 1999*



*Figure 3 – Monument to Georgi Dimitrov removed by the authorities of Dimitrovgrad, 1992*

Notably, the reprocessing of the communist past in Bulgaria cannot be limited to the governmental initiatives and policies. Grassroots movements evolve in response to the need to create a link between the past and the present, re-interpret the events of the past in the light of their aftermath today and reassess the role of

the communist regime with regards to more recent political events. One of the most striking examples of such internal initiatives is the series of famous and scandalous repaintings of the Soviet Army monument in Sofia by a group of anonymous artists known as *Destructive Creation*.



Figure 4 – Destructive Creation repainting of the Soviet Army monument in Sofia: 'In pace with time', 2011



Figure 5 – Destructive Creation repainting of the Soviet Army monument in Sofia: Apology for Bulgarian participation in the occupation of Prague in 1968, 2013



Figure 6 – Destructive Creation repainting of the Soviet Army monument in Sofia: 'Glory to Ukraine', 2014



These acts provoked numerous heated debates in the media (*Capital.bg*, *Dnevnik.bg*, *Standart News*), rooted mainly in the controversy surrounding the Soviet Army monument. Far from being merely part of a legacy of the communist architecture, the monument appears to be a platform for a constant ideological dispute between the pro-Western and pro-Russian tendencies in post-1989 Bulgaria. The monument itself symbolizes the Bulgarian people's gratitude to the Soviet army that liberated Bulgaria from the Nazi occupation during World War Two. Pro-Russian organisations, such as the National Movement of Russophiles, still gather by the monument to celebrate dates that are considered important for the Bulgarian/Russian friendship. For example, one of such dates is the 9<sup>th</sup> September, known as the day of the Socialist Revolution, or the 9 September coup d'état. The activity of the *Destructive Creation* group seems to be in line with a competing pro-European and anti-communist ideology that sees the monument as a celebration of the Soviet dominance in Bulgaria.

Importantly, the debates about the future of the monument are still ongoing. Recent graffiti on the monument replaced the words 'To the liberating Soviet Army, from the grateful Bulgarian nation' on the monument with a demand to dismantle the monument: 'City council, remove this national disgrace'. The Russian embassy issued a press release stating that 'it is extremely alarming to observe how Bulgaria is being engaged in a disgraceful war over monuments' (Fakti.bg, 2018).

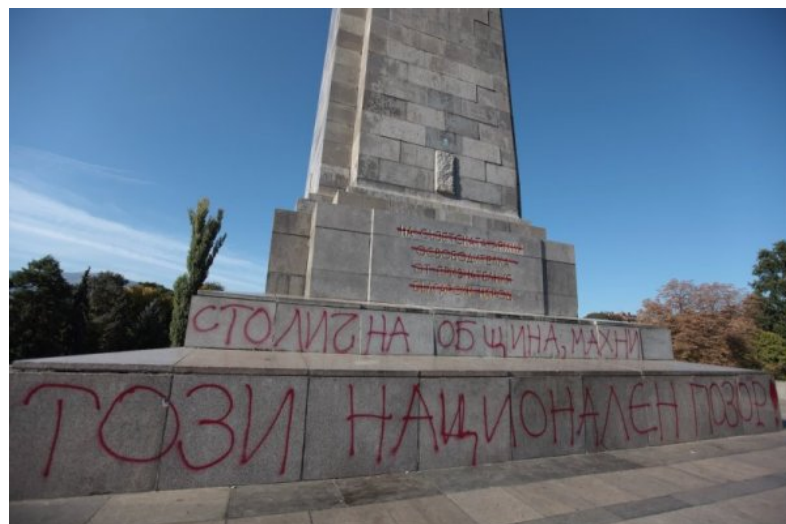


Figure 7 – Graffiti on the Soviet Army monument in Sofia, 2018

As these debates demonstrate, Bulgarian society once again shows the need to discuss the past and establish links with the present in order to overcome the fragmented scattered narrative about the transition that still prevails.

In the context of the present research, it is even more critical to acknowledge that there is no historical museum of communism in Bulgaria. In fact, the only official museum of the socialist legacy is the *Museum of Socialist Art* in Sofia, opened in 2011 and exhibiting sculptures and paintings created in Bulgaria between 1945 and 1989. However, the curators of the exhibition underline the apolitical nature of the museum, stating that the displays' aim is only to preserve the pieces of art that would be lost and decayed otherwise, even though it seems impossible to escape any political references in such kind of a museum.

As contradictory as this sounds, popular opinion in Bulgaria is that as Bulgarians never actually had to fight the communist regime – the overthrow was peaceful and a rather bureaucratic one, they do not feel that the transition is now over (Bell, 1999). It could be argued that the absence of places for collective remembering, or *lieux de mémoire*, means that the regime is still very much present in everyday life. As Puncheva, a Bulgarian correspondent for *Deutsche Welle* says in an article about a car crash including a very old *Chavdar* bus:

One crashed bus Chavdar became a sad metaphor for the old habits of socialism. So, it answered indirectly the question why there is no museum of socialism/communism in Bulgaria. Because its artefacts are still on the move (DW, 2015)

Vukov also supports this idea, using the terms 'unmemorable' and 'unforgettable' describing the urge for remembering limited by the inability to conceptualise the past (Vukov, 2008). Nevertheless, the absence of official 'places of remembering' does not stop people from searching for their own varied interpretations of history. On the contrary, it may be the case that the absence of official interpretations of history is facilitating the emergence of multiple grassroots initiatives that sometimes can be even more effective than the official ones. For example, virtual museums in Bulgaria seem to fulfil the need for alternative remembering institutions. As Gospodinov (2005), Kazalarska (2011) and Gencheva (2012) note, virtual museums in Bulgaria emerge from the narrative tropes of a lack, void, concealment and delay.

It is this combination of the political, economic and historical 'unevenness' (Dimitrov, 2001) of the transition that leads to some obvious difficulties in coming to terms with the past and making sense of it. In between the economic crises, the political instability and the delayed processes of decommunisation, it is not surprising that some informal modes of establishing collective memory have gained momentum.

In her analysis of the contemporary Bulgarian virtual museums, or, *E-socialism*, as she puts it, Gencheva argues that they can all be ascribed to one of two categories: totalitarian (accent on terror and victims) or revisionist (focus on material culture) (2012: 2). For example, a number of museums are web projects reflecting on the secret police files, crimes of the communist regime and the less known aspects of history of the times before the fall of communism. Those include Victims of Communism (an online memorial to the victims of the regime), State Security (or *Darzhavna sigurnost*, a virtual analogue of the secret police files archive) and 1968bg The Prague Spring (a project aimed at coming to terms with the participation of Bulgarian troops in the events of 1968 in Prague).

The so-called revisionist museums focus mainly on a nostalgic image of the past, exploring the artefacts of the socialist Bulgaria: SocMus (virtual museum of socialist era graphic design in Bulgaria), Museum of Communism (a private collection of photos, propaganda, press from the socialist era), Our Childhood (a virtual collection of personal stories about the socialist past), Memories from People's Republic (also a collection of memories in forms of stories, photos).

Gencheva (2012) notes that all these virtual museums do not contribute to filling the gap between the two opposite ideologies: the nostalgic and the extremely victimising one. However, over the past few years, there have been some attempts to go beyond this divisive approach to history. For instance, there are numerous small initiatives presented in the form of blogs and web discussion platforms, that experiment with multiple viewpoints on the historical events. Probably the biggest and most significant one is the project PrehodBG (the TransitionBG), which is a virtual media library and public platform organised by the University of Sofia (St. Kliment Ohridski). Another recent alternative programme of remembering was the *25 Years of Freedom in Bulgaria*, celebrating the anniversary of the fall of communism organised by the *Sofia Platform* organisation, which included a number of poster and photography exhibitions, public history lectures, concerts and films

screenings. These initiatives engage with a more critical and dialectic approach to history and memory, creating more public spaces for discussions and debates.

Combining educational and entertaining functions is also the *Myths about communism* campaign led by the *Sofia Platform* organisation that is using documentaries, fiction films, 'human libraries', and online videos to assist and enrich the process of teaching and learning about the communist past in Bulgarian schools. Other unofficial projects that tackle the topic of the communist past include initiatives such as the academic NGO *Institute of the Recent Past Studies* whose mission is 'encouraging studies of the most recent history of Bulgaria' and the volunteer-led *Communist tours* in Sofia.

Filmmaking, as well, becomes an alternative form of processing and discussing history in Bulgaria, where cinema has always been a vibrant platform for political and historical debates translated into a visual art form. As I argue in this research, the recent revival of Bulgarian cinema coincides with the need for narrating history in a more varied way and provides an alternative platform for public discussions and making sense of the past.

## 2.9. Conclusion

The editors of the volume *History of Communism in Europe* argue that the history of communism 'cannot be reduced to a series of photographs showing ossuaries and mass graves' (Dobos & Stan, 2010: 10). On the contrary, a non-trivial analysis of the ambivalence of communist ideology and its impact on the masses is required in order to fully understand the nostalgia phenomena and the ongoing referencing of the socialist past in modern culture. This is not a trivial task, as it means taking into consideration the positive elements of communism as well as the negative ones. As Dobos and Stan note, 'Life under dictatorship records compelling images of pain, unbearable illusions, severe disappointments, circular errors, as well as passing moments of personal fulfilment (if not happiness)' (2010: 10).

The idea of memory opposing historical amnesia is central to the Aleida Assmann lecture *Europe: a Community of Memory?* (2006). Assmann stresses the importance of selective remembering and forgetting for the nations emerging from the Eastern bloc and their self-identification (2006). Assmann discusses Poland as an example of such complex remembering, built in order to come to terms with the disturbing

past of genocide, occupation, and collaborationism. According to Assmann, the Polish nation recreates a comforting self-image of 'Christ of the nations', emphasising their status as a victim and 'self-immunising against guilt and responsibility' (2006: 17). Sztompka contributes to this idea, highlighting the effective use of coping strategies, still linked with collective memory, that allowed the Polish nation to overcome the post-communist trauma. Coping strategies mentioned in his work *The Ambivalence of Social Change* (2005) are far from being just mythological or escapist ones, as they include accumulating social and economic capital, in the form of establishing new communities, non-governmental organisations, and small businesses, and implementing social innovations.

The failure to put the events of the past into a conceptual framework of remembering and forgetting could be a reason for an identity crisis and inability to cope with this trauma effectively. The relatively peaceful coup in 1989 in Bulgaria made it impossible to build an image of Todor Zhivkov as an 'evil dictator'. At the same time, the non-intervention policy of the Soviet state at that time prevented Bulgarians from remembering Russia as a violent oppressor. Moreover, the changes in 1989 and the subsequent years of economic and political instability resulted in an identity crisis without any clear images of enemies, as opposed to the image of Ceaușescu in Romania, or national heroes, such as Lech Wałęsa in Poland. Vukov (2008) states that an identity-building narrative of the past, if there is a need for such a unified narrative in the Bulgarian case, is yet to be discovered. Vukov proceeds by exploring the unconventional, non-institutionalised forms of remembering, such as web projects, personal collections, exhibitions (2008). Many of these alternative forms of remembering express nostalgia for a simpler and more organised past in Soviet times. Among them, we could mention the online project SocBg (*Memories from People's Republic of Bulgaria*) and the books based on personal day-to-day memories *I Lived Socialism* (Gospodinov, 2006) and *The Inventory Book of Socialism* (Gospodinov & Genova, 2004).

Such vernacular accounts of communism exist in other post-communist countries, including the memoirs *A World Apart* (Herling-Grudziński, 1986), *Hope Dies Last: The Autobiography of Alexander Dubček* (Dubček, 1993), *Stasiland: Oh Wasn't it so Terrible - True Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall* (Funder, 2011), to name a few. Nevertheless, in Bulgaria, the need for the informal platforms of remembering, such as memoirs, is even more significant due to the lack of official

engagement with the topic. It could be argued that Bulgarian cinema as well plays the role of the non-institutionalised informal way of remembering and coming to terms with the communist past. Artistic representations, informal organisations, the arts, and cinema, not only mediate the past but also create a public space that has the potential of engaging with the past in a meaningful way and encouraging a more open discussion about communism and its legacies.

## Chapter 3: Bulgarian National Cinema: Contexts and Cultural Traditions

### 3.1. Introduction

Following from the critical transnationalism approach to cinema introduced in the first part of this thesis, I argue that the most crucial questions that arise in the context of Bulgarian cinema after 1989 can be phrased as *how the local interacts with the global in a Bulgarian national cinema context* and *how the national is constructed within this broader regional and global context*. It is suggested that this process of negotiation can be traced through an examination of the contested representations on different levels from cultural traditions and representations of national identity to contexts of production and distribution. This chapter looks at the ways that the negotiation between the local and the global is conducted, firstly, on the levels of the film industry and, secondly, the cultural traditions of the Bulgarian cinema.

The first part of this chapter looks at the Bulgarian cinema industry development and offers an account of the post-1989 film industry, including its production and distribution struggles due to the lack of funding. It also looks at the international co-productions that are continuing to increase in numbers after Bulgaria's accession to the EU. The second part of the chapter is focused on the stylistic and narrative features that can be considered typical or traditional for Bulgarian cinema.

### 3.2. Bulgarian Cinema: History, Industry, and Context

#### **The History of Bulgarian Cinema**

The first film screenings in Bulgaria took place in 1896 in Sofia, and, according to the *MIR* newspaper 'five scenes from life very well transmitted to cinematography' were projected (Kurdzhilov, 2013). The first Bulgarian feature film *Balgaran e gallant/The Bulgarian Is Gallant* (Gendov, 1915), a comedy about a fun-loving and outgoing gentleman named Bulgaran, was released in 1915. Another emblematic Bulgarian film was *Lubovta e ludost/Love is Folly* (Gendov, 1917), with one of the largest Bulgarian modern film festivals named after it (festival *Love is Folly* in Varna emerged in 1993). However, film production as a more systematised industry in Bulgaria emerged later, in 1920, when the Ministry of Education established the *State School of Cinematography*.

Garbolevsky argues that, even though Bulgarian cinematography emerged long before the accession of the communists to power, it was completely transformed and expanded between 1945 and 1989 (Garbolevsky, 2011). During the Cold War era, cinema in Bulgaria became a domain of special attention, an instrument of ideology, and in 1944 after the communist coup in Bulgaria, a campaign of *kinefication* was initiated in order to provide cinema coverage for the majority of cities and small villages in line with the overall process of modernisation. The use of cinema as a propaganda tool was quite effective, especially in the countryside, where the organised cinemas and mobile cinema theatres became the first experience of cinema-going for many citizens. In 1946 the *Law of Cinema Culture* provided absolute power over all kinds of film production and distribution to the Party, followed by total nationalisation of the film industry and censorship of film import (Garbolevsky, 2011).

During the 1950s the film industry in Bulgaria showed significant growth, and it was becoming more and more difficult to control the filmmaking process. In 1950 the Propaganda Department was created within the Bulgarian Cinematography Institute. Its primary goal was to control film production and promote ideologically suitable films. However, the Department was not always successful:

The powerful, threatening façade of Communism was built around a void. Exactly this tension between ambition to project power and a lack of content behind that ambition gave many artists the opportunity to manipulate the system and to discover a space for free expression and creative opportunity. (Garbolevsky, 2011: 33).

In the years following the thaw, after the death of Stalin in 1953 and the abolition of the Stalin cult in 1956, Bulgarian film entered a period of vibrant development. Even though film directors had to put up with strict censorship, they were in a privileged position, and as the intellectual elite, they were able to obtain full freedom of financial support from the government. People linked to film culture, and to culture in general, were given unprecedented freedom of travel, as well as high standing in society. This freedom also influenced the manner of filmmaking of that time, for example, the directors could extend the process of editing up to 819 days, compared to a maximum of forty days after 1989 (Janakiev, 2006). Directors to some extent were free from the need to be always guided by the mass audience demand. As a



result, they were also free from the pressure of the market and were able to produce a lot of experimental, innovative and original films.

Compared to many other countries of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, Bulgaria experienced significantly less oppression and censorship in the cultural sphere. Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian leader from 1954 and until the fall of communism, was often criticised for carrying out two-faced policies. He tried to stay neutral both in the domains of politics, resuming diplomatic relations with the USA and keeping good relations with the USSR, and culture, declaring that, although art should continue to be an instrument of ideology, communist and western ideology could coexist peacefully (Garbolevsky, 2011). As a result, even today it is also somewhat difficult to define Bulgarian cinema production in terms of dissident or mainstream culture, as quite often in Bulgaria both cultures existed side-by-side. The criticism of the regime was often articulated on screen through personal stories, subjective existential struggles or in the sublime forms of satire, allegories, surrealism, and poetics (Portuges, 1992: 535).

Nevertheless, self-censorship was still pervasive and remained an influential factor in the cinema production. Bratoeva-Darakchieva notes that the film censorship in Bulgaria was ambiguous and inconsistent

[...] During the whole totalitarian period there was no official censorship, just as there are no clear (declared) rules of censorship. Therefore, the limits of acceptable social critique remained unclear, despite the abundance of party documents regulating the domains of art and culture. (2013: 207)

In a recent documentary *Kinoto Sreshtu Vlastta/Cinema Against the Power* (2017), the director Oleg Kovachev provides an interesting insight into the history of censorship in Bulgarian dissident cinema starting from the end of World War Two and up until the fall of communism. In particular, the film demonstrates that sometimes, the final decision on a specific film depended entirely on the personal relationship between the filmmaker and the censoring body, especially in the less obvious cases.

Even though it may seem that censorship in Bulgaria was not as strict as in the Soviet Union, it is vital to acknowledge that quite a significant number of films were banned in the period from the 1950s to 1989. One of the first banned films *Zhivotat*

*si teche tiho/Life Flows Slowly By* (1957) by Binka Zhelyazkova, expressed a mood of disillusionment and a state of an existential non-being under the communist regime (*Cinema Against the Power* 2017). This tendency of politically subversive cinema gradually increased, resulting in a series of dark, depressing films: 'The films from this period were abstract, allegorical, angry, and introspective' (Garbolevsky, 2011: 67). The films such as *Byalata staya/The White Room* (Andonov 1968), *Privarzaniyat balon/The Attached Balloon* (Zhelyazkova 1968), *Noshtem po pokrivite/On the Roofs at Night* (Zhelyazkova 1988) *Ponedelnik sutrin/Monday Morning* (Aktasheva & Piskov 1966), and *Vchera/Yesterday* (Andonov 1988) pictured suppressed anger, the state of 'nothingness' and silence, and a longing for freedom under the regime. Other films showing a pessimistic and critical depiction of the communism such as *Na malkiya ostrov/On a Small Island* (Valchanov 1958) and *A byahme mladi/We Were Young* (Zhelyazkova 1961), were criticised for being too metaphorical and poetic, and, therefore, too open for interpretation, which conflicted with the ideals of socialist realism.

While some films were banned just for being too tragic or not having a happy-end, some of the films, however, could be considered radically critical and subversive. The films *Prokurorat/The Prosecutor* (1988, Sharlandjiev) tells a story of a prosecutor who tries to maintain morality in the context of bureaucracy and lack of freedom, ending with his suicide because of his inability to fit into the system. The already mentioned *Monday Morning* (Aktasheva and Piskov, 1966) features a prostitute joining a communist brigade to change her ways for the better, but becoming a vocal critic of the regime.

This brief review of subversive films during the Soviet rule shows that there is indeed a long tradition of politically engaged and even radical cinema in Bulgaria. It could be argued that some new films, after the fall of communism, are following this tradition, not only focusing on the difficulties of the post-1989 transition but directly challenging the status quo in their stories. Films such as *Shmenti Capelli*, *Zift*, and *Tilt*, for example, expose the existing anxieties about the events straight after 1989, as well as the issues with corruption in Bulgaria today.

In 1989, the fall of communism and the transition brought a dramatic transformation to the film industry in the post-communist countries. As the Iron Curtain no longer separated the East from the Western world, the industry of the region was facing not only ideological but also economic problems. After 1990, the

government practically stopped financing films, causing unemployment and drastic changes in film distribution. Film production dropped, and state financial subsidy could only provide funds for one or two films a year (Iordanova, 2008).

According to the former director of the Bulgarian National Film Centre, Alexander Grozev, one of the main reasons for the decline of Bulgarian cinema after 1989 was the lack of distribution channels:

After the end of communist rule, Bulgarian cinema disappeared – literally. Bulgarian cinema was robbed of many things, most importantly of its means of subsistence, the material basis was destroyed for a few years (Grozev, 2008).

In the 2000s films in Bulgaria began a slow renaissance, and a number of domestically successful films were produced. Among them are *Mila ot Mars/Mila from Mars* (Zornitsa Sophia, 2004), *Dzift/Zift* (Gardev, 2008), *Shivachki/Seamstresses* (Todorov, 2007), *Iztochni Piesi/Eastern Plays* (Kalev, 2009), and *Svetat e golyam i spasenie debne otvsyakade/The World Is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner* (Komandarev, 2008).

As the critics of Bulgarian cinema Iordanova and Holloway argued, the developments in Bulgarian cinema in the early 2000s gave hope for a new upsurge (Holloway & Iordanova, 2006). When Bulgaria joined the European Union, the filmmaking in the country also started its gradual transformation, becoming a part of the European cinema network, notable for its international co-productions and multiple funding sources, such as Eurimages. The shift in state support stimulated filmmakers to seek new ways of funding in forms of international collaborations and private sponsorship. The lack of financial resources also inspired many independent filmmakers to create low-budget films.

I would argue that Holloway and Iordanova's appraisal of the state of Bulgarian cinema was adequate, even if slightly too optimistic in terms of its timeline. I would apply the term revival only in the sense of a continuous process, rather than an end result that, in my opinion, is yet to be achieved. The film industry in Bulgaria is still quite small, and there are some evident difficulties, both with financing and distribution. There is, however, evidence that Bulgarian cinema is following the path of a gradual revival, continuing to change and develop in the following directions:

- New film companies and the reorganisation of old ones;
- A new generation of film directors and actors, as well as film critics and academic researchers in film studies;
- More new films are produced that can reach a wider audience, locally and internationally;
- Variety of new film festivals in Bulgaria and the region as a whole;

One of the major film studios in Bulgaria is the former state-owned *Boyana*, established in 1962. After 1989, the studio was on the verge of closing, but in 2007 the studio was privatised by an American company. After a few years of being practically bankrupt, *Nu-Boyana* managed to become commercially successful again. Now the company offers facilities for some Hollywood based film productions, such as *Conan the Barbarian* (Nispel, 2011), *300: Rise of an Empire* (Murro, 2014), *The Expendables III* (Hughes, 2014). Only one Bulgarian film, *Koncert za ocelelite/Concert for Survivors* (Nichev, 2013), was filmed in the studio in the last few years, so it could be argued that the studio is just an outsource location for Hollywood. At the same time, the development of a successful studio in Bulgaria can help the film industry in many indirect ways: by making new connections with the international film community, by promoting Bulgaria as a tourist destination, and simply by making Bulgarian cinema more recognisable on the international market.

The most obvious advantage of studio development is in supporting the Bulgarian film industry. An example of such support was the charitable sale organised by *Nu Boyana* to support financially the campaign of the Bulgarian entry for the Academy Awards with *Sadilishteto/The Judgement* in 2015. Another direction of support for the Bulgarian film industry is the opening of the Nu Boyana Film school, where young filmmakers can obtain knowledge and practical experience on set.

It should be noted that in the recent years, state support of the film industry has also shown some signs of improvement. In 2015, the secured amount of state support is approximately 6 750 000 euro. At least 80% of this amount was used to support film production, at least 10% to support distribution, and at least 5% to support promotion (Bulgarian NFC, 2017).

Furthermore, having assessed the Bulgarian film industry, European Commission has decided to provide additional support (EC, 2012). Other budget sources include

the Bulgarian National Television Fund, The National Culture Fund, European programmes Media and Euroimages and some others.

Many filmmakers have shown that film production on a low budget can be successful both in terms of critical appreciation (festival awards, international distribution) and among local audiences. An example of such success is the 2011 film *Lora ot Sutrin do Vecher/Lora from morning till evening* (Kotsev 2011), which was filmed with a Canon 7D camera on a budget of only 10 000 Bulgarian Leva (around 5000 euro). Other independent and low-budget films shot in this way are *The Eastern Plays* (2009) and *The Lesson* (2014).

These low-budget productions would have been impossible without the new generation of talented independent film directors that work in Bulgaria now. At the same time, it should be noted that after 1989, many of the veteran directors had serious difficulties in financing their projects: some, such as Binka Zhelyazkova, stopped making films at all, and others, such as Ivan Andonov, Rangel Vulchanov, made films occasionally with quite significant gaps between productions (Holloway & Iordanova, 2006).

The directors of the 'middle generation', born in 1940-50, who were at the peak of their career by 1989, faced the problem of career development, as they had to put some of their works on hold. As a result of the drastic changes in society and the film industry, some of the directors are referred to as the lost generation (Holloway & Iordanova, 2006). Some of the directors chose to emigrate, and others changed their profession (Holloway & Iordanova, 2006). Even though several new directors emerged in the early 1990s, including Marius Kurkinski, Nidal Algafari, Ilian Simeonov and Khristian Nochev, and Andrei Slabakov, as I have already mentioned above, the years right after the fall of communism were the hardest for the Bulgarian cinema, and sometimes not a single film was released for a whole year.

The 2000s marked a slow revival for Bulgarian cinematography, when new directors such as Iglia Trifonova, Zornitsa-Sophia, Silvia Pesheva, Ivaylo Hristov and Lyudmil Todorov, managed to work in the new environment and created films on the issues of migration, merging borders, and the post-communist chaos. Iglia Trifonova's debut film *Pismo do Amerika/Letter to America* (2001) became the first post-1989 Bulgarian film to attract wide international attention. In 2008 *The World Is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner* by Stephan Komandarev became the

first Bulgarian film to be shortlisted for further voting in the Foreign Language Film category for the 82nd Academy Awards. A number of films were successfully presented at various European festivals: *Zift* by Javor Gardev (Moscow International Film Festival, Vilnius International Film Festival *Cinema Spring*), *Eastern Plays* by Kamen Kalev (Bratislava International Film Festival, Warsaw International Film Festival), *Avé* (2011) by Konstantin Bojanov (Hamburg Film Festival, Sarajevo Film Festival, Wiesbaden goEast).

Another sign of the recent Bulgarian film revival is the domestic success of the films *Missiya London/Mission London* (Mitovski 2010) and *Love.net* (Djevelevkov 2011) – the first films since the fall of communism that were able to top the Bulgarian box office (beating Hollywood blockbusters *Clash of the Titans*, *How to Train Your Dragon* and *Alice in Wonderland*) (NFC 2015). Both films are notable for their aggressive marketing strategies, making them part of a broader European tendency for appropriating Hollywood-style promotion techniques (Nedyalkova, 2014). A more recent example is the double promotion campaign of *The Judgement* (2015) which ran both in Bulgaria and the USA, and included advertising on billboards and in public transport, the release of posters and teasers, reviews and interviews in media. The film about the murders that occurred on the Bulgarian border during communist times reflected on how history repeated itself during the recent refugee crisis in Europe, which also contributed to the film's topicality and popularity.

In the past decade, a number of film festivals focused on Eastern European and Balkan cinema have emerged in Europe. Such festivals include *LET'S CEE Film Festival* in Vienna (focused on productions from Central and Eastern Europe), *South East European Film Festival* in Los Angeles, *The CinEast* (ciné-East) film festival in Luxembourg (dedicated to the film production of the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe), *Thessaloniki International Film Festival* (special program Balkan Survey), *goEast Film Festival* in Wiesbaden.

In 2015, up to 5% (337.5 million euro) of state funding was aimed at supporting film festivals and other film events, as well as at international promotion of Bulgarian films. The major contemporary Bulgarian film festivals are the *Sofia International Film Festival*, *Sofia Independent Film Festival*, *The Golden Rose* (Varna), and *Love is Folly* (Varna).

It is safe to say that in the past few years, Bulgarian cinema has finally started to get more international attention. Participation in international film festivals and regaining popularity on the local market (with domestically popular films like *Love.net* (2011); *Tilt* (2011); and *Mission London* (2010) are both signs of a gradual recovery of Bulgarian cinema.

One of the main reasons for this recovery lies in the certain stabilisation of the economy in Bulgaria after a prolonged period of a crisis. Other factors that contribute to the revival are the external European funds, as well as the multiple opportunities for international co-productions that became available after Bulgaria's accession to the EU. An example of this are the two films screened in the Un Certain Regard section at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival, *Western* (2017 Grisebach) and *Directions* (Komandarev 2017), both co-productions with Germany. These two films marked the return of Bulgarian cinema to the Cannes Film Festival for the first time in 23 years. Another aspect of the international co-productions is their potential to appeal to wider audiences. An example of a more intercultural-oriented film is the already mentioned *Western* that debates the relationship between the German seasonal workers and the local villagers on the Bulgarian border. Another recent case study is the mockumentary *King of the Belgians* (Brosens & Woodworth 2016), a co-production with Belgium and Netherlands that explores a road trip of King Nicolas III in the Balkans where he encounters the cultural clashes between the East and the West.

At the moment, it seems that the route of co-productions with bigger and more internationally acknowledged national industries is the most effective way of making Bulgarian cinema more visible. This has to do not only with the significant financial support during the production stage, but also with the increased opportunities for exposure and distribution that would have been impossible for a film produced exclusively with local audiences in mind.

## Production and distribution

Contemporary Bulgarian cinema is still facing numerous challenges, such as the lack of funding, low interest among the local audiences, distribution difficulties, lack of cinemas in small towns and the constant need to compete against the larger and better-financed industries, mostly, Hollywood. Another issue is the rising number of large networks of big cinemas, Odeon, for example, or the so-called 'mall cinemas'. The issue with this gradual gentrification is not only that the screened films are usually big Hollywood productions, but also that the tickets are more expensive. Another problem is that these cinemas are often located in shopping malls outside the city centre, making them less accessible to the older audiences. As one of the focus groups showed, this can become a problem for the more elderly viewers who do not own a car and cannot easily access these cinemas even if they want to see a particular film.

At the same time, there are some signs showing that an alternative route might also be an option for the independent films. For instance, the distribution issue is addressed with the help of new small cinemas and creative spaces, constructed to project niche and low-budget films. Among these alternative cinemas are the *Euro Cinema*, cultural centre *G-8 Cinema*, *Lumiere Cinema*, *The House of Cinema*, *Cinema Vlaikova* in Sofia, and *Faces Cinema*, *Cinema Kosmos*, and *Lucky House of Cinema* in Plovdiv. All of the mentioned cinemas offer screenings of Bulgarian and European films as opposed to the major multiplexes in city shopping centres that are predominantly projecting Hollywood blockbusters.

The total number of cinemas in Bulgaria has remained in significant decline since 1989, with the numbers dropping from 2,174 in 1990 to only 179 in 2000, and reached an all-time low of 40 in 2014 (Alexandrov, 2017). This trend, however, might change in the future, as the number started to rise gradually to 216 screens in 2017 (NSI 2015). The average number of viewers at one screening remains quite low (17.5 per screening, according to the NSI), but the overall number of viewers rose by 5% to nearly 5.4 million people, and the overall income rose from 42.88 to 45.5 million leva. At the same time, it is important to note that half of the attendance and income falls on the capital, Sofia.

The issue with the lack of cinemas in small cities is now being addressed by some programmes aimed at attracting new audiences to the new Bulgarian cinema.



Among those programmes the most recent one is the initiative of the Sofia Independent Film Fest 'Sofia Film Fest: on the road', which includes screenings of the new Bulgarian films and meetings with the filmmakers and actors in the smaller Bulgarian towns, such as Ruse, Sevlievo, Gorna Oryakhovitsa, to name but three.

Regarding production, in 2015 166 films were produced in Bulgaria, including feature films, short films, animation, television films, and documentaries. Even though the overall number of feature films remains almost the same if compared to the year 2010, the number of films produced specifically for cinema distribution has increased from 15 to 45, which might indicate some positive shifts in the distribution conditions (Alexandrov, 2017).

It is important to acknowledge these recent positive developments that show that, despite some problems in the state support of the film industry, cinema continues to emerge as a vernacular force of remembering. A recent market report shows a significant rise in interest in local films:

The year 2017 was also marked by the most spectacular return of the audience's interest in national cinema since 2010. One after another, several new Bulgarian feature films became box office hits throughout the year. Admissions to domestic films almost tripled in Bulgaria from 176,395 in 2016 to 512,521 in 2017, while domestic films cashed in over 2 m EUR in 2017 compared to 612,000 EUR in 2016 (Film New Europe, 2017).

Another change that contributed to the development of new Bulgarian cinema was the Film Industry Act passed in 2003. The Act regulates subsidies for Bulgarian films and co-productions, making its priority to 'support new talents and young writers working in the cinematic sector', 'present Bulgarian cinema in the country and abroad' as well as 'create conditions for foreign film production in the country' (FIA, 2003). The National Film Centre is vested with authority to 'support the development, distribution and showing of Bulgarian films in the country itself and abroad' and 'develop laws relating to the film industry' (FIA, 2003). Former director of the NFC, Alexander Grozev pointed out that this act 'provided a legal basis for the development of the film industry [in Bulgaria]. In the last three years, cinema has begun to breathe, to live' (NFC, 2015).

Recently, there has been a debate on proposing crucial changes to the FIA, proposed by filmmakers and film scholars, which resulted in heated debates (BNT, 2017; NFC, 2017). The major proposal is to promote diversity and innovation in the film industry by providing micro-subsidies to smaller budget Bulgarian films, which could help young and independent filmmakers. Not underestimating the role of state support in terms of production funding, many contemporary filmmakers use a scheme of multiple sources instead of relying on one primary sponsor.

Even though film production and distribution in Bulgaria continue to have their problems, this overview demonstrates that recently there have been some positive changes, particularly in terms of the steady rise of the domestic films' popularity. Such an increase in interest might introduce new possibilities for the local cinema to become a more established platform of negotiating and debating the past, highlighting the important role that cinema plays as a vernacular mode of collective remembering.

### **Co-productions and transnational aspects**

Once again, national cinemas have become a central focus from the point of view of re-establishing identities and simultaneously opposing the hegemonic ideology of Hollywood. According to Higson, national cinemas play a twofold role as both a stabilizing and a destabilizing tool – cinemas 'pull together diverse and contradictory discourses, to articulate a contradictory unity', but at the same time, always maintain this state of contradictoriness, where cinema becomes a place where various versions of the nation, its past and present are articulated and negotiated: 'it [cinema] needs also to be seen as actively working to construct subjectivity as well as simply expressing a pre-given identity' (Higson, 2002: 64).

One of the possible side-effects of globalisation is the increasing opportunities for international and transnational co-productions that are not only offering financial support to smaller cinema markets but also stimulating an ongoing dialogue with the Other on the representational level. While national cinemas are usually identified as counter-hegemonic, in the sense of their resistance to Hollywood, some transnational cooperations could also be considered counter-hegemonic if we view the smaller regional units as opposition to Hollywood as well.

In his study of the conceptual issues of national and transnational cinema, Bergfelder defends the concept of transnationality, making a case for co-productions allowing for more productive dialogue and more profound understanding of the national through this transcultural negotiation (2005). Bergfelder speaks of European co-productions as an alternative form of globalisation which is not reinforcing the ideological and conceptual hegemony of Hollywood but, instead, offers a space with fluid boundaries, more open to dialogue and exchange.

Similar, to Bergfelder, Papadimitriou talks about the national as a response against the hegemony of Hollywood: 'One of the key dimensions of the "national" in cinema has often been associated with political issues – in the sense of national self-designation and recognition, and a resistance to culturally imperialist models and industries (most specifically Hollywood)' (2011: 497). Further, Papadimitriou discusses the influence of transnational co-productions on the representations of Greek national identity and notes that despite the apparent limitations of the transnational dynamics, it allows for a more open dialogue with the Other, often with Europe as the Other, as is the case too in Bulgarian cinema, and also for creating more visibility for small national cinemas (2011).

Halle, too, highlights the dialogic role of globalisation in the creative industries using his concept of interzone to investigate the potential of cinema to establish a space of negotiation and contestation (2014: 23). As opposed to the traditional 'upward and outward' approach used, in particular when we talk about Europeanisation processes, Halle suggests that cinema enables an interaction that is fluid and dynamic, as it establishes a border-crossing dialogue that goes 'across, through, from below, sideways, crisscrossing terrains' (2014: 184). An *interzone*, therefore, emerges where there is interaction and contestation of diversity between smaller and less formal communities that 'develop now more frequently not as metacommunities but as subcultures, micropolitical associations, ethnic migrant identities [...] and other "lower order" distinctive societies' (2014: 184-5).

Furthermore, drawing also on the importance of the urban centres in establishing those alternative imaginative communities, a concept used by Halle intentionally to indicate the dynamic nature of these communities as opposed to Anderson's idea of 'imagined communities', Halle suggests that the interzones are no longer determined solely by geography or social and economic factors (2014: 184). There are several reasons to believe that the concept of interzones can be applied to the

transnational co-productions with Bulgarian participation in recent years. First of all, they include multiple sources of funding, they go beyond the traditional geographical neighbours: while, still, there are some traditions of Balkan co-productions with Greece, Croatia, Slovenia, there are also some co-productions with other countries, like Japan and Belgium. Interestingly, there are also many co-productions with the other countries of the former Eastern Bloc (Germany and, Russia, Croatia), which are linked by a similar historical experience but are not necessarily close geographically.

I have to add here, that even though the idea of interzones seems quite applicable to the Bulgarian case, not all aspects of Halle's reasoning are relevant to this study. For instance, Halle argues that new European cinema acts as an interzone reconnecting the once disrupted flow of communication between the East and the West. While this is true to some extent, and I would agree with the statement that cinema has a significant reuniting and communicative potential, I would also like to acknowledge that the socialist cinema under the Soviet rule was also not homogenous, and some anti-hegemonic tendencies that opposed the 'disruption' existed despite the omnipresence of the totalitarian regime. Thus, my argument would be that after the accession to the EU, Bulgaria indeed joined a new European cinematic cultural space, however, it should be acknowledged that the Bulgarian cinema did not exist in a disconnected space under the regime, and some influences and connections existed despite the major differences in the Western and Eastern cinema industries. At the same time, I fully acknowledge that the transnational aspects of cinema production play a crucial role in the Bulgarian film revival. Moreover, immediately after the fall of the regime, the Bulgarian film industry survived mainly through European co-productions. Even today, the co-productions are sometimes the only way of obtaining the necessary funding for an independent film.

With regards to Halle's concept of the interzone, I argue that the Bulgarian transnational co-productions in the film industry sector is an example of a border-crossing and negotiating a new diverse mode of establishing a transnational dialogue, especially on the European level. Several recent collaborations indicate that the border-crossing is closely linked to the common cultural and historical experience, rather than based on the geographical proximity. One example is the first ever Lithuanian/Bulgarian co-production *Miracle* (Vertelyte 2017), a

tragicomedy about a middle-aged woman and the difficulties she faced in the post-Soviet Lithuania. New co-productions with Russia, including *Labirinty Lubvi/Labirints of Love* (Shteryanov 2016), *Requiem for Mrs. J.* (2015 Vuletich, Serbia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Russia, France), and *Brighton4* (Koguashvili, in production, Bulgaria, Russia, Georgia) also indicate some newly re-established dialogue between the collaborating countries.

It is safe to say that most of the recent Bulgarian films, including the case study films of the current research, are co-productions with differing levels of Bulgarian participation. *The Colour of the Chameleon* (2013) is a co-production with Slovenia; *The Petrov File* (2015) – with Germany, *The World is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner* (2008) – Bulgaria, Germany, Slovenia, Hungary, Serbia; *Tilt* (2011) is a co-production by Bulgaria and Germany. At the same time, co-productions with non-European countries are very rare, one of the first being the recent co-production with Japan - *A Picture with Yuki* (2017) produced by the *Chouchkov Brothers* company.

It can be argued that co-productions reveal a new path for Bulgarian cinema and opening up new possibilities for participation in festivals. Recently, after a nearly 30-year break, two Bulgarian co-productions – *Western* (Grisebach, 2017), a co-production with Germany and Austria, and *Directions* (Komandarev, 2017), a co-production with Germany and the Republic of Macedonia – marked the return of Bulgarian cinema to the Cannes Festival programme. It is likely that this tendency will continue in the future, as the Bulgarian National Film Centre has recently announced that the amount for co-production support has been increased from approximately €440,000 in 2016 to €500,000 in 2017 (Dobroiu 2017), which suggests that the number of transnational co-productions will continue to rise in the following years.

### 3.3. Bulgarian National Cinema: National Film Traditions, National and Transnational Influences

Cinema plays a vital role in reflecting and negotiating national identity, and it seems natural that national cinema is understood as a function of a certain historical, social, political and cultural context. This section looks at the various cultural influences that form the new Bulgarian cinema and make it a snapshot of

contemporary Bulgarian society, even though the case study films are looking back to the Soviet times and the time of the transition.

The conceptual framework of these contexts, however, remains quite vague, and the units of analysis in national film studies differ from genres and themes to styles or traditions. I would argue that no one genre is dominant in post-communist Bulgarian cinema. Moreover, the existing genres seem to be blended and combined rather than pure. Instead, one of the concepts I am using in this section is *national film traditions*, suggested by Badley, Palmer, and Schneider (2006). National film traditions are described as ‘bodies of films’ with certain common features resulting from specific conditions of their production (making these traditions ‘national’), and yet formed by transnational influences that ‘foreclose any understanding of the tradition solely within the terms of its “native” culture’ (2006: 2). Drawing on this definition, the present study identifies the recurring stylistic and narrative patterns that can be attributed to Bulgarian cinema as a body of films.

### **Intertextuality: the influence of literature and theatre and the arbitrariness of time, absurdism, satire**

Discussing the literary adaptations in the post-communist cinema of Eastern Central Europe, Pethő (2008) argues that literature, more specifically, the traditional national literature of the pre-Soviet times, has played an important role in the rebuilding of national identity after the fall of communism. In a way, after the fall of the Soviet ideology, national identity of these countries had to be reclaimed, and the easiest way to do this was by going back to the roots and exploring the national ideas in the pre-Soviet literature (Pethő, 2008). The importance of national literary traditions was also reinforced by the school curriculum that in most post-soviet countries aimed at establishing the body of books, novels, and authors that could bear the role of the founding fathers, creating the literary canon of the nation (Pethő, 2008: 18).

Pethő suggests that the literary canon in most post-communist countries often dates back to 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels, which are seen as ‘a repository of the collective national identity’ (Pethő, 2008: 20). The only exceptions from this rule are the national cinemas of Slovakia and Slovenia (the Slovenian spring movement, for example), the countries that became independent for the first time after the fall of communism (Pethő, 2008: 20). Instead, these countries turned to adaptations of

modern and less acclaimed writers. A similar tendency can be observed in the new Bulgarian cinema, despite the fact that Bulgaria has a longer history of sovereignty than Slovenia and Slovakia. A significant number of the new films use literary adaptations, but most of them do not focus on the Bulgarian literary canon while turning to the modern novels about the recent past written in the past twenty years, including the case study films, such as *Zift*, *Chameleon*, *The World*, and *Mission London*. The link between literature and cinema is strong on various levels in these films: the content of the films is also often linked to the writers and literary circles.

I would argue that such diversion of focus from the literary canon to a more recent past is rooted in the strong need to re-evaluate the recent communist past first. This could also mean that the cultural 'repository' (Pethő, 2008) of Bulgarian collective national identity is located in the more recent past and linked deeply to the turmoil of *prehoda*.

Three of the case study films (*Zift*, *Chameleon*, *The World*) are based on contemporary novels: *Zift* (2006) by Vladislav Todorov, *Zincograph* (2010) by Vladislav Todorov, and *Die Welt ist groß und Rettung lauert überall* (1996) by Ilija Trojanow). One (*Operation SC*) is based on a play *BG-WC – My House is my Castle*, and one is based closely on the film director's experience as a theatre director (*The Petrov File*). There is also an example of a reverse influence of the cinema on literature, as the film *Tilt* inspired a book of the same name, while *Zift* was intended as a film screenplay but was released almost simultaneously in the form of a screenplay and a novel.

Apart from the firm literary basis, some of the films also have references to literature in the narrative. In *Chameleon*, the story revolves around a banned novel (*Zincograph*), and *The Petrov File* tells a story behind a novel (or a memoir by a former state security agent). There are also subtle references to literature in *Zift*, for instance, when we see the book that the protagonist is reading (Voltaire's *Candide*). Even though it is not explicitly stated in the film as a part of the plot, it is evident that the book has deep symbolical meaning and is connected to the story, as the protagonist, similarly to *Candide*, is becoming gradually aware of the shortcomings of the system and becomes disillusioned and pessimistic about his future.

The role of theatre is also of great significance for Bulgarian cinema. The link is established both in terms of the industry and production. The film school in Bulgaria

is inseparable from the theatre school, therefore actors and filmmakers often come from a theatre background, and in terms of the visual style and themes.

During Soviet times, theatre in Bulgaria enjoyed quite a privileged position, as it was subjected to much less censorship than cinema, for example. Theatre productions were using their own subtle language, using metaphor and hyperbole to criticise the absurdity of the surrounding society (Gavrilova, 2014). To some extent, this legacy of freedom influenced the role that theatre plays in Bulgaria now. Not surprisingly, theatre, then, remains committed to the current social and political issues.

An example of such political engagement with the past is the play *Ostalgie* by Irina Goleva and Ognyan Golev. They clearly establish the role of the play in not only encouraging a discussion about the past, but also posing questions about the aftermath of the transition and the 'artificial amnesia' that the lack of discussions about the past creates: 'Where people do not talk about the past, it seems that the past does not exist' (Sofia Live, 2013). Interestingly, this type of theatre that offers a critique and social commentary has enjoyed a very wide popularity in Bulgaria, proving once again that there is still a need for cultural processing of collective memories about 1989 in the form of posing questions and challenging the hegemonic versions of history with the small counter-hegemonic stories, giving 'voice to marginalized stories that otherwise would be lost' (Gavrilova, 2014).

Another crucial function of theatre, as well as of cinema, is its role in re-establishing connections in the community and regaining the lost sense of community:

This kind of theatre makes us see and listen to the people next to us; thus re-establishing the broken social web, and making us regain the feeling that we are part of a community of shared stories, rather than anonymous elements lost in an incomprehensible world (Gavrilova, 2014).

It could be said that theatre, therefore, plays a role that is very similar to that of cinema in modern Bulgaria – it provides a space for dialogue, helping to recreate a sense of community once again, reconnect the fragmented fabric of reality.

Regarding the narrative, the issues of an existential search and crisis combined with the loss of a sense of community is what links Bulgarian cinema about the



events of 1989 to the national theatrical and literary traditions. A number of film scholars, such as Iordanova and Holloway, suggest that existential concerns are often the focus of many new Bulgarian, and Balkan, films, linking the Bulgarian film culture to the earlier traditions in Polish and former Czechoslovakian film, described as '[...] fine and often gloomy existential explorations on enduring issues of destiny, death, distress and disorientation' (Iordanova, 2003: 153).

At the same time, the existentialist tradition in new, post-2007, Bulgarian cinema is deeply rooted in the social realism and literary traditions dating back to the Bulgarian National Revival, or the Bulgarian Renaissance, and up to the modern literary movements in Bulgaria. Even though traditionally Bulgarian literature was often focused on the issues of national identity (Vazov, Elin Pelin) or figuring out the role of the Bulgarian nation between the West and the East (Kostantinov), some authors, such as Radichkov and Vezhinov, alternatively explored the individual concerns and personal development in the context of major historical turbulence. The film industry eventually adopted many of those existential works, once again intensifying the strong connection between literature and cinema in Bulgaria.

The themes of the struggle of the individual for freedom of choice is most vivid in *Zift* and *The Petrov File*. In *Zift*, the protagonist (the Moth) himself is an embodiment of a personal struggle against the system: he was unfairly imprisoned, and betrayed by his own friend, lover, and the whole government. An epitaph for the Moth given in the film states that 'the moth – who wondered randomly in life, lived by chance and died thereby'. In *Petrov File*, all aspects of individual life including career, family, and even the right to end your life are controlled by the totalitarian system. As in *Zift*, in *The Petrov File* the only possible way of reclaiming personal freedom of choice is through death, in this case, suicide. Although they have to die for their freedom, both protagonists manage to escape the system and evoke their right to make individual existential choices. Moreover, their goals (reveal the truth about the puppet democracy party in *Petrov File* and hide the black diamond in *Zift*) are achieved by the end of each film.

Several ways to come to terms with the past and deal with existential crises are proposed implicitly in some of the case study films. *The Petrov File* implies the power of culture and art in the form of theatre, as means of both personal expression and political statements, and literature, hence the importance of memoirs as the means to restore and reclaim personal memories.

Religion is suggested as another way to heal in *Zift*, where the church, the main church in Sofia – the Nevski Cathedral, was the only place the Moth felt safe to go when he was poisoned in the completely transformed Soviet city of Sofia that he could no longer recognise. For the protagonist, the church is an asylum, where he can confess his sins and still be accepted. Religion is represented as an institution that provides support in the instability and plays the role of a turning point in *Zift*. However, even the purity of the church as an institution is challenged in *Operation SC*, where the church is accused of collaboration with the government during and immediately after the events of 1989. This representation, once again, shows that in the era of political and social turmoil nothing can be considered sacred, constant, or safe from violation from the state.

On the transnational level, this tradition of a preoccupation with existential concerns is also linked to Italian neorealism. For instance, Kristina Grozeva notes that her film *The Lesson* (2015) was considered close to Italian neorealism, because 'it tells a story of the little man with a lot of love' (Litvestnik, 2015). Possibly, this sympathy and love for the protagonist is what distinguishes new Bulgarian film from social realism, which is focused on the large-scale of history and the masses, rather than individuals, especially if they are weak and unsuccessful. Note, for example, the comment of Ivaylo Hristov on his film *Losers* (2015): 'Losers (underdogs) are intelligent sensitive people, but they struggle to adapt to the system, and the system pushes them away. I sympathise with them so much' (BTA, 2015).

On the other hand, social criticism and the depiction of class struggle and the fight of the working men and women against the system is what links neorealism and social realism in Bulgarian cinema. Discussing the issues of history and the role of the individual in Eastern and Central European cinema, Iordanova argues:

[...] the stories told here are not so much those of people heroically influencing the course of history but of those who cannot do much more but stand by and witness events; they are stories of the vulnerable and the powerless, the small and the weak, the pawns and the underdogs (2003: 44).

To develop this idea further, it is important to note that Bulgarian national ideology and identity has always been rooted in the belief that Bulgaria is 'a bridge' somewhere 'in-between' different bigger powers in the world (Todorova, 2009). Eventually, this idea was only strengthened by the tragic events of World War Two,

the painful transition after the fall of communism and the subsequent process of joining the EU. Therefore, the little man who becomes a powerless witness of history is understandably one of the most frequent types of protagonists in the new Bulgarian cinema, especially in the case study films that are specifically dealing with the traumatic historical events after 1989.

The intertextual influences of literal and theatrical traditions in the Bulgarian cinema is not the only characteristic that links it to the postmodernist movement. The sense of despair caused by facing the absurdity of reality results in a specific absurdist treatment of the temporality in the case study films. In most of them, the way that the real and the surreal are treated reveals some temporal gaps in the historical fabric after the transition. The Bulgarian film critic Dimitrova observes: 'Absurd poetics are not typical for our cinema [...] Over the past twenty years, however, it has proved to be one of the most adequate codes of portraying reality' (Dimitrova, 2002). Thus, absurd poetics emerges as the only logical reaction to the paradoxical reality of *prehoda*, reflecting and revealing its contradictions. The critical anti-hegemonic potential of absurdism is actualised in close connection with the notion of history and historicism, and, therefore, is used as an opposition to the nostalgic historical films which reinforce ahistoricism and the commodification of history.

Bulgarian cinema after the fall of communism unarguably exists in such a turbulent time when one social, economic and political system is changing to another, which, naturally, creates a certain 'historical gap' (Jameson, 1986: 303), which is addressed in numerous films about the transition and its consequences. Therefore, more generally speaking, Bulgarian cinema on the topic of the post-1989 transition can be viewed as part of the counter-hegemonic work in society, addressing the present as the gap between the dominant ideology of the past (Soviet ideology of the pre-1989 times) and the future (ideology of capitalism in the era of globalisation). This subversive potential is present in the case study films, as they portray the present existence of the Bulgarian society as something 'in-between' the past and the present.

Discussing the subversive potential of magical realist fiction of the 1980s in East-Central Europe, Șandru argues that this pattern is common for Soviet and post-Soviet literature: 'This was the case of East-Central Europe in the oppressive decades of Communist totalitarianism, when "coded" storylines, embedded

symbolism, and metaphoric indirection became the staples of resistant literature' (2012: 101). At the same time, the subversive potential of absurdism goes beyond the hidden latent criticism empowered by ambiguities and metaphors. A deeper level of criticism evolves by an exposition of the above-mentioned gaps, or inconsistencies in the fractured fabric of history. By challenging the stability of the normal and by exposing the absurdity of excessive rationalisation and bureaucratisation in a totalitarian state, absurdism opens up a window to the unreal, to the alternative, to the illogical and, therefore, the fundamentally different version of reality (Zamora & Faris, 1995: 3). Therefore, the hegemonic ideology represented as a grotesque world of bureaucracy and rationality is being challenged, as an alternative view into the cracks of society is offered by absurdism. The absurd and grotesque, thus, become the alternative oppositional language, which is metaphorical, but real enough to refer to particular fractures existing in the dominant ideology.

Besides the obvious economic and political shortcomings, the tragedy and trauma behind the fall of communism also lie in the drastic and somewhat unjustified change of the ideological paradigm. Genis has argued that the fall of the regime was so fast and easy that it inevitably exposed the illusory nature of the totalitarian ideology, which relies on creating 'a zone of heightened mythopoetic tension, inside which anything can happen' (Genis, 2016: 152). For example, in my interview with Alexander Balabanov, the director of *Petrov File*, he explicitly notes that it was his goal to avoid any depiction of the 'mundane everyday' (*bit*):

The film locations are in the theatre, the hospital, and in a bank, there is no depiction of the 'real', everyday life of communism. Communism is only depicted in a play about Lenin, as an ideology, while the mundane (*bitov*) life is missing. I consciously avoided it in the name of some *purity*. [...] Even the actors I chose; I did not want them to have any traces of mundanity, of the Bulgarian *bit* in the typical panel building, in the kitchen, because usually life was centred in the kitchen at that time... [...] I escaped from this real *bit* of socialism, and that is a conscious decision. The other part of the movie was in a bank office, and, finally, in the graveyard, which, again, is an eternal place... (Balabanov, 2016)

An unlikely clash of the mundane and the poetical is present in some of the case study films. It could be argued that such places act as examples of heterotopias

(Foucault 1967), spaces that are in some way combining the everyday with a certain level of 'otherness', or ability to shock, disturb and transform. Foucault suggests that cemeteries, prisons, hospitals could all be considered heterotopic. These places in the films offer a clash between the real and the surreal.

In this context, along with magical realist fiction, it could be argued that absurdism lies somewhere in between, creating a space that combines these two worlds: 'an ambiguous space characterised by the interaction between the bizarre and the ordinary' (Sandru, 2008: 21). A number of such self-contained spaces can be discovered in the case study films. In particular, the semi-real spaces in *Zift* and *Chameleon* – the overlapping realities of the past and the future. In a subtle way, however, the absurd spaces can be seen in the other case study films, even in those that represent a reality abiding by the rules of the extratextual world.

Şandru notes that the importance of these alternative realities lies in the 'longing to return to an atemporal, mythical setting, a remote, isolated, and self-contained *locus amoenus* not subject to the arbitrary intervention of history and the State' (2008: 27). This argument corresponds to the unique dynamics of the state spaces like the prison, hospitals, asylums in the totalitarian regime. Historically, those spaces played an important role in the reinforcing of state ideology under the totalitarian regime, which makes them a more interesting object of study. Such restrictive ideological spaces can play an ambiguous role in the narrative – by creating a world where the two functions of these spaces coexist simultaneously: the restrictive role of prisons, schools, hospitals, asylums on the one hand, and their liberating potential as spaces protected from outside intrusion on the other.

Not surprisingly, such ambiguous treatment of public spaces can be seen in all case study films, and these transitional public spaces include prisons, hospitals, psychiatric hospitals, schools, universities, and a refugee camp. In a way, the films are attempting to reclaim these spaces from the totalitarian state of the past, but, interestingly, these attempts are not always successful.

The prison in *Zift* is the most detailed display of a totalitarian space – which is a whole different world, conforming to its own rules and isolated from the outside world to such an extent that in times of turmoil, multiple changes of powers in this case, it remains an oasis of stability, and in a way the inmates are protected from the terrifying speed of changes on the outside. By contrast, the psychiatric asylum in

*Petrov File* is a horrifying space of uncertainty, mixed with a feeling of guilt for the protagonist, because it is a place where his wife was supposed to be 'normalised' and isolated from society after she dared to oppose the regime. The hospital in *The World* is also a metaphorical transitional space, sanitised and lacking any emotion, but intensifying the contrast between the logical life in Germany and the messy emotional, but more spiritual life in Bulgaria, embodied by the noisy and uncivilised grandfather of the protagonist.

Another quite different example of the isolated spaces is the refugee camp in Trieste in *The World* – this is also a world of its own with certain customs, traditions, its own power and riots, its own social ties and strict laws. At the same time, it was also a transitional space literally (for the refugees trying to escape the regime) and symbolically (as a metaphor for transition due to its location on the border of the Eastern and the Western worlds).

Interestingly, most of the transitional spaces mentioned above are to some extent inescapable. The Moth in *Zift* dies, the protagonist of *Chameleon* falls out of the ship and dies before he even can approach the Western shore, Chicago in *The World* never actually goes to the US and remains in the refugee camp, the protagonist of *Tilt* ends up locked up in prison, and the main character of *Petrov File* commits suicide. It seems that the only film from the case study sample that shows a successful transition of the main characters is *The World*, however, even in this film two of the three characters who manage to cross the border die in a car accident. It can be argued that the above mentioned isolated spaces act as metaphors for the delayed transition in Bulgaria and the fragmented bitter reality that is present in post-communist Bulgaria. In one way or another, the characters of these very different spaces remain stuck in the in-between state, between the past and the present, but also between the East and the West. The identifiable gaps in history represent the gaps in ideology and discourse surrounding the transition. At the same time, absurdism can have a liberating and critical potential, particularly when the humorous side of it is revealed.

The constant presence of dark humour in the Bulgarian films is not a new feature. As Hristova notes, the popularity of comedy films in Bulgaria significantly exceeded the popularity of any other genres (2017: 7). She notes: 'Lack of freedom in communist Bulgaria can be expressed most precisely through comedy films, where the hypocrisy of the socialist utopia is rejected in the most effective way – through

laughter' (2017: 7). Therefore, satire traditionally acted as a tool for overcoming censorship to some extent and for criticising the absurdity of Soviet rule through humour (Hristova, 2017: 12).

Sandru argues that the humorous elements in the totalitarian state expose the inconsistencies and 'gaps' in the regime, just as magic realism works to expose the gaps in the 'fabric' of history (2004). The only difference is, again, that these films expose not only the 'layer of totalitarian madness' (Sandru, 2004: 21) of the Soviet past but also, even more terrifyingly, the gap between the ideal expectations and the harsh reality of the present.

Satire under an authoritarian rule becomes an opportunity to mildly criticise those in power, giving the possibility to hide behind the façade of a joke. One way of doing this is by subtly mocking the system, just by showing the way that some social and political institutions function, without having to criticise them explicitly. For instance, in *Operation SC* we see the ineffective work of the banks, such as the scene at the bank, where people are trying to pay their bills with their change, the community support, with the electrician taking special pleasure in torturing his clients and switching off their electricity, and the police, whereby most of the police workers are involved with the mafia. The political system is ridiculed in the city street names: the protagonist lives on 'the longest street in Bulgaria' – Democracy Street ('This is a long street and mistakes are inevitable'). Similarly, in *Mission London*, satire is used as a tool for transgressing the inequalities between the protagonists – no one is safe from being mocked and, thus, no one can be considered superior.

### 3.4. Conclusion

Since 1989, Bulgarian filmmaking has gone through a prolonged difficult period while the industry was privatised. Due to the severe lack of financing sources and distribution channels, a radical decline in the industry continued up until the late 2000s. However, since 2007/2008, the Bulgarian film industry has been showing some signs of a gradual revival, as the number of Bulgarian films has increased overall, as well as the number of cinemas and cinema-goers. Recently, several new local and regional film festivals have appeared providing new spaces for distribution of new Bulgarian cinema.

It is evident that, despite the post-transitional turmoil, new Bulgarian cinema shows a certain tendency towards establishing continuity with pre-1989 national filmmaking. One of the examples of this continuity in the film industry is the tradition of subversive political filmmaking. Building on the movement of politically subversive cinema during communist rule, many of the new Bulgarian films are now also challenging the status quo. Even though it is clear that they do not face the same consequences for their criticism, to some extent these new films are bridging the gap between the pre and post-1989 Bulgarian tradition of subversive political cinema.

The brief overview of the national film traditions in the case study films shows that, despite still being at the recovery stage after the post-1989 decline, Bulgarian cinema is connected to the global transnational tendencies of contemporary filmmaking, including the diversity and blending of genres and the interaction of transnational stylistic influences. Generally, the elements of transnational and national are in a state of a constant dialogue between the local and the global, and it is difficult to identify them in isolation. However, it is important to analyse them as separate entities in order to establish the place of Bulgarian cinema within a wider transnational discourse. There are clear connections of Bulgarian national cinema to other regional local cinemas, as well as wider global cinema tendencies.

Most importantly, the analysis of cultural traditions in Bulgarian cinema reveals a number of post-1989 tensions and anxieties reflected as gaps and discontinuities in the narrative and style structure of the new Bulgarian cinema. The main themes that emerge through the analysis indicate a range of problems in post-communist society, and most of them require a dialogue, open discussion, negotiation, and simply, telling a story that is being marginalised. Films dealing with the recent history and its aftermath expose these inconsistencies and fragmentations of history being subversive in a very subtle way: through the use of different levels of disrupting reality through absurdism and satire.



## Chapter 4 Mediating and Negotiating National Identity in New Bulgarian Cinema after 1989

### 4.1. Addressing the Negotiation Processes through the Post-socialist and Postcolonial Theoretical approaches: Applicability and Limitations

After 1989, the nationalist discourse in many of the post-socialist countries was built around the idea of ‘a return to Europe’, as a return to civilization, democracy, and true cultural identity, rather than the rejected values of the USSR (European Commission, 2005). This, in its turn, resulted in the necessity to prove that Bulgaria, in fact, belongs to Europe historically and culturally, which was manifested in the attempts to ‘market themselves as civilised, developed, tolerant, or multicultural enough to be geographed as European’ (Kovačević, 2008: 86). The discourse of *Europeanisation* provoked a whole number of problematic collisions within national identity re-building process, which I suggest, would be most useful to analyse through the postcolonial theoretical lens, focusing specifically on the interaction between the core and the periphery and the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

It is evident that the use of postcolonial theory in the field of post-socialist studies is quite problematic and contested, and, in particular, its applicability to film and media studies and the Eastern European and Balkan region has to be justified. Firstly, some confusion comes from the necessity to identify the coloniser, which is not as straightforward as in the classic postcolonial analysis applied to the traditional former colonies like India. Within the postcolonial framework, the coloniser broadly meant the West, however, this is not so simple if we talk about the post-socialist states since, in the former Eastern Bloc, the Soviet Union was not formally recognised as a coloniser. On the other hand, it would be perhaps too vague and reductionist to call the West a coloniser after the fall of communism. As Cooke notes, in the case of East Germany, ‘East Germany appears more obviously “postcolonial” if we accept [...] that the “post in post-colonial” is the same as the “post- in post-Soviet”’ (2005: 58). This statement is, of course, problematic, because Germany represents a unique case of post-communist transformation that involves unification and all the repercussions of this complicated process. Thus, Cooke’s argument can only be generalised to other countries of the Eastern bloc with some caution. Nevertheless, it seems that Cooke is right in his suggestion that postcolonial theory might be a useful analytical device when we talk about the East broadly as a

discursive space of East and West contestation. Veličković suggests that the potential of such analysis lies in the historical rethinking of the legacies of communism and the role that it plays in the reconstructing of history to serve the modern needs (2012). As she notes, 'a long overdue critical engagement with this discourse of "the return to Europe" as well as with the various "self-colonizing" practices in eastern Europe is much needed' (2012: 168).

In his critique of the applicability of the postcolonial approach for the studies of the former Eastern Bloc region, Sowa notes that it is often insensitive to class differences and, therefore, elitist (2014). He also criticises the lack of an emancipatory narration within postcolonial studies discourse. Agreeing with Sowa on the fact that, indeed, more attention should be given to intersectionality within the postcolonial approach, I argue that recognizing the injustices is still crucial. Even more so, these injustices have to be acknowledged in the countries where the complex intersections between Eastern, Western European, modernisation and civilisationist discourses clash with the policy of fake internationalism inherited from the Soviet state. A theoretically balanced alternative to the above mentioned concern is suggested, for instance, by Tlostanova who sees the response to such a problem in the intersectionality of the post-colonial/post-socialism theorization (2010). Tlostanova also highlights the role of the visual arts and the concept of decolonisation in the process of recognition of the injustices, but also for challenging the status quo.

Miglena Todorova argues that the equation between Europeaness and Whiteness has been present at least since the early twentieth century (2018). She examines the discourses of racial purity in the *National Geographic* magazines reflecting on the origins of the new-coming immigrants from South Eastern Europe. As she shows, even though the Balkan region was described as European culturally, it was still represented as not 'quite white' in terms of race, which put it in the middle position somewhere between the categories of 'white' and 'non-white' (Todorova, 2006: 404). The character traits, as well as the appearance of the Balkan peoples, are described in these magazines as a hybrid of European and Oriental. In other words, they are identified as not really white, but with a potential to become 'elevated, civilised and emancipated from their own backwardness' (2006: 405). Thus, as both historical and fictional writings about the Balkans in America and Western Europe show, Balkanism, similar to Orientalism, reflected a comparable

hierarchy of power where the mixed, hybrid Balkan other was contrasted to the white, Eurocentric self (Todorova, 2005; Krasteva, 2017). A suggestion supported both by Todorova and Tlostanova is that we need to seek a broadly dialogical intersectional approach, one that would not only analyse the exploitation of race in connection to gender and class, but also aim at seeing the similarities between the two different versions of modernity.

On the other hand, the discourses of *whiteness as Europeanness* that are now dominating the national public debates in Bulgaria, should be considered as a legacy of communism as well, not just as a concept blindly inherited from the West. For instance, Miglena Todorova (2018) argues that in Soviet times, nationalities were racialised by the official state discourse, and the category of race was replaced, or hidden behind, ethnic nationalism. This hidden form of racism, nevertheless, did not mean that the ethnic minorities were not exploited and oppressed: The Roma minority, for example, was still described as a homogenous 'threat' to the socialist state, since they were ascribed a 'lack of ability to reason, hence lack of humanity' or even, described as 'genetically inferior' (Todorova, 2018: 115). In Bulgaria, the need to deal with the perceived backwardness of the Romani people was described as *The 'Gypsy' problem*. As Todorova and Tlostanova both argue, this racialization in the Soviet and satellite states involved some 'borrowed' or internalised racist knowledge of the West, which Todorova describes as 'secondary Orientalism' (Tlostanova, 2010; Todorova, 2018). Specifically, in the Bulgarian case, national identity was still built on the ideals of belonging to Europe, especially in contrast with the 'real' Orient embodied by Muslim women 'as profoundly non-modern and non-European – and, therefore, non-White' (Todorova, 2018: 122).

Thus, Europeanness was, even within the socialist state, considered and equated to supremacy, civilization, and progress. This suggests that both East and West operated within similar oppressive projects of modernity based on the hegemony and the ideas of racial purity and, broadly, 'whiteness'. As Todorova further notes, on the surface, the Soviet bloc supported the anti-colonial movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America utilizing the opportunity to challenge the capitalist order in the West. Nevertheless, the discursive practices surrounding this support were ironically built on the same categories of exclusion, othering and orientalisng. Both systems also were based on the praising of the future as progress and blaming

the tradition (the past) for everything reactionary and regressive. As Tlostanova says, both forms of modernity were characterised by a 'colonization of space by time' (2010: 21).

As Baker argues in her critique of *postcoloniality without race*, the discourses of race have long been ignored in the academic debates about the Balkans. Baker adds that while the concepts of postcoloniality were effectively applied to enhance the understanding of the 'racialisation of the Balkans', the 'racialisation in the Balkans' remained largely unstudied (2018: 11). Instead, a postcolonial approach *with race* should foreground:

the position of racialized minorities (as well as the ethnic-majority nations who have been racialized as white) in the region's demographic history, whether these are Roma who identify with and/or are ascribed 'blackness' or people of colour who have travelled through or settled in the region (2018: 9).

Indeed, the category of race has always been present in the post-socialist world, and the region has been a part of a racialized world for much longer than is usually suggested (Imre, 2005; Baker, 2018). In the Bulgarian case, the continuity of the socialist race-related discourses can be observed in the context of the so-called Revival Process and its consequences. It can be argued that the Revival Process demonstrates the contingency of the race-related discourses in today's Bulgaria, when the clash of ideologies after 1989 introduced new dimensions to the orientalisising view of the non-titular ethnicities. The continuity of the discourses of race, in its turn, proves the embeddedness of the Bulgarian local categorisations of race in the world Eurocentric framework equalling whiteness and progress.

Thus, the challenge, but also the potential strength, of the postcolonial approach to the post-socialist territories lies in the diversity and multiplicity of the possible intersections of race, class, gender, and other hierarchical society systems. Such an approach could help challenge the binary hierarchical framework demonising the East or the West, and, instead, offer an analytical tool that Tlostanova calls a feminist border thinking – an approach where special attention is given to the areas characterised by ambiguity and in-betweenness. As Kassabova notes in the preface to her book *Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe*, the borders are always *involving*: 'Once near a border, it is impossible not to become involved, not to want

to exorcise or transgress something. Just by being there, the border is an invitation' (2017: xv).

Thus, the Balkan region, and Bulgaria in particular, seems to be an appropriate place to apply the methodology of border thinking. Since the post-1989 transition in the countries of the region was not a simple replacement of ideologies; instead, it initiated a coexistence and overlapping of multiple ideologies, inviting and encouraging multiple acts of border crossing (Koobak & Marling, 2014: 334). The decolonial approach offers much needed common ground for postcolonial and post-communist experiences.

#### 4.2. Discourses of Inclusion and Exclusion: Between Balkanness and Europeanness

This section applies the border thinking approach to the study of the fluid boundaries between 'us' and 'them', and to the discourses of exclusion and inclusion are built on the privilege of belonging to a wider concept of civilized Europe. The section looks at the patterns of East/West negotiations in the case study films.

It is necessary to establish first that the imagining a nation involves an outward-looking process of imagining of the Other (Mihelj 2011). In order to establish the national boundary, the nation needs to be aware of the other nations. As Mihelj notes, this awareness is particularly widespread in peripheral nations that 'try to emulate or appropriate models developed by the world's most powerful nations, or are, alternatively, keen on rejecting them and developing alternative models of nation-building' (2011: 31). Bulgaria can be seen as an example of such a peripheral nation that adopts a mimetic behavior towards western national models.

At the same time, Bulgaria is often described in terms of a 'bridge' or a 'meeting point', usually meaning a bridge between the East and the West, or between Christianity on the West and Islam in the East (Ghodsee, 2009). It is evident, however, that the discourse of the bridge is in itself quite problematic, as it describes the country *in-between*, or *not yet there*, which once again suggests that the postcolonial approach might be a useful tool of analysis in the Bulgarian case. At the same time, the unique position of Bulgaria on the border should not be dismissed as exclusively negative. As Obad suggests, it is the process of negotiation with the coloniser, imagined or real, that we need to focus on. Moreover, the postcolonial

condition of any given nation can be viewed as potentially constructive, since this outsidersness has the potential for empowerment and critical reflection for the post-socialist subject that had lost their 'transitional naïveté' (Obad, 2014: 36).

Kovačević (2013) also suggests that the postcolonial condition emerges as a useful analytical tool to seek for intra-Balkan solidarities, in particular when analysing Balkan cinema as a category. Discussing films created in the 'post-Yugoslav space', Kovačević states that such cinema represents a similar experience of the countries of the region in their pursuit of joining the European Union, or simply being accepted as European. Thus, such films not only act as a unifying force of solidarity between the Balkan countries, but also create a link between the Balkan countries 'to the global capitalist crisis while critically reconsidering the promise of European Union integration' (2013: 190).

The opposite, and less optimistic, outcome of the postcolonial condition, however, should also be considered. Bakić-Hayden suggests the concept of nesting orientalism that emerges when one Balkan country compares itself to another, explaining the tendency of each region to view the cultures and religions to its South and East as more conservative and primitive: 'The designation of "other" has been appropriated and manipulated by those who have themselves been designated as such in orientalist discourse' (Bakić-Hayden, 1995: 922). Not unique to Bulgaria, this practice of 'nesting' could be perceived as a common practice in particular for small nations that feel the need to assert their differences from other nations and simultaneously, also becoming more aware of the differences of the other nations (Hayward, 2005).

An alternative concept of 'nested peripheralisation' is offered by Pfoser in her study of the narratives used by the people living near the Estonian-Russian border (2017). The use of peripheralisation instead of orientalism makes the conceptual framework more sensitive to the class and power relations that result in certain inequalities, or 'uneven local experiences of transformation' (Pfoser, 2017: 2). Pfoser argues that the East/West binaries are very difficult to escape in these negotiations linked to the reconfigurations of the European Union border after the fall of communism. She also states that these difficulties are rooted deeply in the economic and political asymmetries particularly evident on the EU borders.

After the events of 1989 and the subsequent restructuring in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres, Bulgarian national identity faced a major challenge. Post-1989 transformations were particularly traumatic for Bulgaria as a nation that is claimed to be obsessed with history (Roudometof, 2002; Liotta, 2001; Todorova, 2010). To some extent, it can be argued that most nations are obsessed with their history and heritage, while the obsession becomes reactivated as a response to certain cultural or political crises. I argue, however, that in the Bulgarian case, the reactivation of this obsession is an ongoing process that remained relevant during the communist rule and after the fall of the communist regime. More recently, the crisis was once again reactivated by the marginal position of Bulgaria in the EU. I suggest that this new reiteration of national identity crisis has evoked a response from the new Bulgarian cinema, which has provided a platform for negotiating it.

On the other side of this spectrum is the problematic issue of self-colonisation (Kiossev, 1995) or self-exoticism, which is present in many post-communist Bulgarian films, and could be perceived as the result of this profound need to be accepted. In his theory of self-colonising cultures, Kiossev argues that the difference in power between the less modernised cultures and the 'Great Nations' results in the reframing of the nation in the context of a lack, or loss of something (Kiossev, 1995: 1). Kiossev notes that self-colonisation is different from colonisation, because it means a different kind and level of 'backwardness', while these cultures are 'not central enough, not timely and big enough' if compared to the core, they are at the same time 'insufficiently alien, insufficiently distant and insufficiently backward', leaving the self-colonising cultures in 'the space of a generative doubt: We are European, although perhaps not to a real extent' (1995: 3).

Kiossev's approach seems relevant to the present study, even though his explanation of the phenomenon is quite metaphorical. Kiossev suggests a multilevel model of 'rationalisations' that lead to self-colonising impulses, and most of them can be applied to the Bulgarian case. For example, the first rationalisation suggested by Kiossev is the idea of a rebirth or revival of the nation, which means a return to some version of a glorious past before the traumatic moment in the recent past (1989), in order to 'self-convince such a culture that its own historical time has not started at the traumatic point but has been continuous from some honourable Past towards the glorious Future of the Nation' (Kiossev, 1995: 5). A second rationalisation is explained as a necessity of two competing ideologies – Westernisation (Europeanisation) and Nativism. The former is constructed as a linear progressive movement in the traditions of modernity, while the latter,

according to Kiossev, 'looks for and often finds (i.e. invents) the lost "authentic substance" of the Nation, before it has been corrupted by aliens, and then idealises it in a bucolic manner' (1995: 6). The doctrine of nativism, thus, holds a dangerous potential of overindulging in the discourses of othering, because all new influences are impossible, or at least difficult, to incorporate into an ideology based entirely on the distant past and inherent perennial characteristics.

*Mission London* follows some of the patterns of self-colonising cultures suggested by Kiossev (1995). For example, the first two rationalisations proposed by Kiossev, namely the idea of a rebirth of a nation and a return to the once lost pre-traumatic times, are present in *Mission London*, even if they are used ironically. The fact that the Bulgarian President's wife, Selyanska (translated literally as *Peasant*) is determined to invite the Queen of England to the event exacerbates the absurdity of the plot and highlights the tendency of self-deprecation. At the climax of the film, during the celebratory dinner at the embassy, the over-the-top show illuminates the anxieties and the inferiority complex that are central to the Bulgarian tendency of self-colonisation.

The show itself not only suffers from gigantism, but also heavily relies on the long-lost Bulgarian golden eras – first, the proto-Bulgarians, and then, the already mentioned National Revival after the liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire. Initially, the over-the-top fire show was meant to impress the British Royal Family, while also proving to them that Bulgarians are part of the European 'family'. As the president's wife Selyanska says in her speech before the dinner: 'You will become convinced yourself that we all belong to one and the same cultural motherland called Europe'. The choice of these two particular scenes from Bulgarian history to prove that Bulgarians are, indeed, Europeans, is not accidental. Both episodes represent the glorious times when Bulgaria still shared a common path with Europe, before the traumatic event of the communist coup in 1944 that disrupted the natural flow of history. Using Kiossev's terminology, the self-colonisation through a return to these particular idealised times in history allows Bulgarian national identity to return to its lost 'authentic substance' (1995: 6) and thus, respond to the expected critique from the colonising West.

The latter critique is, nevertheless, unavoidable: the concert goes wrong, and the firework to celebrate 'the victory of the Bulgarian soldiers' on stage results in an explosion and fire in the Embassy hall. As the guests, including the fake Queen,



leave the room, the absurdity of the situation becomes even more obvious. The image of the fire in the embassy is the peak of absurdity in the film's narrative: there is a very extravagant dinner served, the decorations are very pompous and classic, but the fire destroys everything, and the aftermath of the disaster looks fake and ridiculous. The fear of embarrassment becomes a reality, as a Scotland Yard detective arrives at the embassy and, in shock that something like that could happen in an embassy, exclaims: 'What is going on here? These people are barbarians!'

Indeed, 'these people', the Bulgarians, are finally mocked for their constant desire to prove themselves as truly European. I would argue, however, that the film goes beyond simply following a certain self-colonising pattern. *Mission London*, in its satirical manner, offers a glimpse into the absurdity of this desire and reflects critically on the inferiority complexes rooted in the overbearing sense of always remaining stuck in the in-between state of 'not European enough'.

The use of satire in *Mission London* seems to be directed at everyone, with the possible exception of the ambassador, Varadin, who remains the only distanced and somewhat rational character, even though his position in itself is ironic and absurdist as well. His distanced position is highlighted when he tries to cope with the absurdity of the world around him by watching a hypnotherapy video and then, desperately trying to relax by using the counting techniques.

The theme of binary oppositions of the East (Bulgaria and the USSR) and the West (mostly Europe) is manifested explicitly in *Operation SC*. The popular Bulgarian actor and public persona Vladislav Karamfilov-Vargala plays two characters in the film – the Big Guy and the Little Guy. The Little Guy is an intelligent but poor and unemployed teacher. The Big Guy is powerful, manipulative and tied to the mafia and the secret services. Their relationship is quite metaphorical – as essentially, they could be described as two versions of the same person – the Little Guy who did not manage to adapt to the changes of *prehoda* and got crushed by the system, represents the past; the Big Guy who was obviously more successful in adapting, represents the future. In Tlostanova's terms, the binaries of East and West are interchanged for the temporal binaries of the regressive communist past (embodied in the Little Guy who seems to be stuck there and then) and the progressive future (represented by the Big Guy whose only option to survive in the changing world was to become a violent and manipulative criminal).

The theme of the East/West contestation is also explored in *The World*, namely in the hospital scene, when the Bulgarian grandfather breaks into a German hospital, violating all possible rules by drinking wine and playing cards with his grandson, while the German doctors unsuccessfully try to discipline him. Later on, the contrast deepens, when we learn more about the calm and monotonous life of the grandson in Leipzig, whose job is presented as very monotonous and includes translating instructions for vacuum cleaners. At the same time, we see a contrasting image of a lively Bulgarian town, where everybody is drinking wine, gossiping, cheering and playing backgammon. Apparently, the German here represent order, civilisation and the epitome of Europeanness, while the Bulgarian family is quite disorganised and represents fun, danger and excitement. Furthermore, in the same scene in the hospital, the grandfather tries to persuade his grandson to leave the hospital and explore the world outside, since this is the only way for him to restore his memory. He does so by literally chasing him out of the hospital with a stick. When the German doctor enters the room and speaks in German trying to stop him, the grandfather aggressively threatens him with the stick as well, saying 'Who are you trying to scare?'.

It can be argued that the location and setting of the hospital scene rather than the national stereotyping itself, dictates a certain sterility and order, while the scenes set in rural Bulgaria automatically imply more freedom. Interestingly, however, in the focus groups, such an outburst of violence was perceived as a lack of Europeanness proving the fact that Bulgaria is linked to the Balkans is stronger than to the EU. For example, one participant stated that such behaviour was 'typical Bai Ganyo', even though he says that the phrase was more 'Balkan rather than specifically Bulgarian – a Serbian, a Macedonian, a Greek would have reacted in the same way!' (Participant 12, 43). Even though in the group, not all agreed with this comment ('So are you saying that it is a typical Bulgarian characteristic to beat someone with a stick?' (Participant 10, 34), they all agreed that this was not what a European would have done.

Other Bulgarian traits mentioned by the participants included greediness, talent in trickery and scams. These traits, according to the participants, become especially manifest when the Bulgarians go abroad, where the foreigners are too naïve or unsuspecting:

It's typical of the Bulgarian, he is always looking to steal something. There [abroad] people are more open, more open-hearted, and they don't even think in this manner. Maybe it is because we have always been poor, maybe... I don't know, maybe this is just human nature... This is how it was during socialism: we lied to them that we worked, they lied to us that they paid us, and, in the meantime, everybody was stealing (Participant 2, 28).

Moreover, Bulgarian self-exoticism, and the tendency towards 'schemes and scams', is highlighted in *Mission London*, according to the participants:

- Well, some features are exaggerated to make fun of the Bulgarian 'genius' in the sphere of ... (laughs) stealing! Bulgarians, in my opinion, are like that, it is very typical: to want to earn a lot of money without having to work for it (Participant 2, 28).

Being quite critical of the Bulgarian national characteristics in comparison to Europe, the participants of the focus groups, as well as the film directors in their interviews, nevertheless took pride in admitting the Balkanness of Balkan national identity. It could be even argued that when it comes to national identity in Bulgaria, the strongest and most traditional association is that with the Balkan region. However, as Maria Todorova rightly suggests 'one may very carefully speak of the existence of tentative Balkan identities (in the plural) as part of multiple identifications of the separate Balkan national identities' (2004: 9), especially after the conflicts following the fall of the regime in former Yugoslavia. Still, after the fall of communism Bulgaria went through another revival of the 'Balkanness' discourse: 'Among the Balkan nations, the Bulgarians share in all the frustrations of being Balkan, and yet they are the only ones who seriously consider their Balkanness' (Todorova, 2009: 75). Pointing out the continuous internal conflict between the East and the West, Europe and the Balkans, *The World* starts by describing the location in this way: 'Somewhere in the Balkans, where Europe ends but never starts', referring again to the spatio-temporal dimension of failing to 'catch up' with a more developed and progressive version of modernity.

It seems logical, therefore, to consider the case study films as a part of Balkan cinema, especially considering the feedback provided in my interviews with the film directors, who all stated that Bulgarian cinema is, first of all, part of Balkan cinema. For example, Yavor Gardev talks about his film *Zift* as part of a Balkan tradition:

'The film belongs to the *neonoir* genre, but it has its specificity. This specificity is connected to a certain local, ethnic 'flavour'. This *neonoir* has this specific Balkan ethnic flavour' (Gardev, 2017).

It is quite difficult, however, to distinguish what in particular constitutes the specific 'ethnic flavour' of Bulgarian and Balkan cinema, and the specific sense was never actually defined in any way by the film directors. Though the category of Balkan cinema is effectively used by many scholars, including Iordanova, Papadimitriou, Veličković and others, the concept may be problematic and is challenged by some critics for its broadness. For example, Hirschfeld challenges Iordanova, arguing that each small cinema is a 'European individual rather than a Balkan constituent' (2011: 34). As the focus groups and interviews show, there is a possibility to consider any small cinema from the Balkan region as both European and Balkan. Surely, the definition of Balkan cinema needs further clarification, and, in the present research, I use the definition suggested by Kovačević who, similar to Todorova, sees "The Balkans" in their multiple constellations: as a discursive regime, a metaphorical- mythical topos, and a historical site of collective memory' (2013: 188).

The identification with the Balkans in the case study films is sometimes linked to another aspect of the post-1989 identity formation described by Kiossev – that of self-exoticism. For example, one of the most popular characters in Bulgarian literature is directly linked to the name 'Balkan' – the already mentioned Bai Ganyo Balkanski, the hero of the many novels by Aleko Konstantinov (1863-1897) and multiple film adaptations. The character was so popular that a derivative noun 'bayganyovshtina' (Bay Ganyo-ness) emerged, meaning 'boorishness, crudeness, grossness'. According to Todorova, Bay Ganyo was 'exposing a phenomenon that he loathed: the superficial mimicry of civilised behaviour without the genuine embrace of real values' (Todorova, 2009: 40).

An image of a modern Bay Ganyo is replicated as the ultimate Balkan/Bulgarian character in some of the films that were discussed in this research. The stereotypical idea of a barbaric and uncivilised Balkan man is exploited in a twofold way: it is not only relatable to the Bulgarian audience aware of the cultural Bay Ganyo myth but also appeals to the western gaze as a 'commercially viable product for western consumption' (Archer, 2012: 196). Such a hyperbolic and simplified image of the Balkans sometimes takes the bipolarity of the West and the East to the extremes,

making the Balkans, as Žižek puts it, 'The Other of the West' (1999), an example of the ultimate self-exoticism. Elsaesser also describes the process of self-exoticism as a two-way strategy 'for regaining agency under conditions of asymmetrical power-relations' (2015: 175). This asymmetry becomes evident on another level – not only the relationship between Bulgaria and Europe is framed by this hierarchy of East/West, but also the relationships within the Balkan region. The concept of nesting orientalism describes a hierarchy of the Balkan states where there always is a neighbour who is perceived as *more Balkan* and, therefore, *less civilised* (Bakić-Hayden, 2010). The idea of nesting orientalism links to the overall concept of Balkanization as connoting violence and mutual hatred. A unifying concept, however, is needed for this analysis, and I argue that the East/West asymmetry can be observed on various levels and there is a need to evaluate the links between these different levels of 'Europe (west) – Europe (east) – the Balkans – Orient'. The interaction between the symbolic core, semi-periphery, and periphery requires further evaluation.

Moreover, we also need to look at the temporal dimension that inevitably influenced the East/West dynamics in the past three decades. A broader conceptual explanatory framework is needed, thus, to include and evaluate other reasons that result in orientalisering, othering and nesting discourses, not only religious or cultural. A valuable contribution to this debate is Goldsworthy's reconceptualisation of the idea of *Ruritania* – a broad descriptor of the less developed and less modernised territories sometimes used in literary fiction (1998). Goldsworthy's theory helps to not only go beyond the local regional boundaries of Balkanization and include a broader concept of Eastern Europe in the analysis but also provides an analysis that considers the political and economic reasons behind this asymmetry of power. Goldsworthy, for instance, suggests that the discourses of Balkanization reveal the preference for the exciting narrative of 'ancient hatreds' rather than analysing the more mundane, but just as devastating, failure of Yugoslavia's economic and constitutional experiments after 1945 (1998: 31).

Even though it is safe to say that the new Bulgarian films frequently reflect on the national characteristics of Bulgarians in a sceptical way, they do not generally associate them with 'industrial backwardness' (Todorova, 2009: 77). Sometimes in the case study films there is an opposite representation, praising the positive aspects of such characteristics as spiritualism, probably within a general trend of

Orientalisation, the visual spectacle of the cultural heritage, extensive use of metaphors and poetics, and the ability to express sincere emotions and ignore the rules. For instance, fascination with spiritualism is clearly expressed in *The World* by introducing the importance of backgammon in the narrative development. Backgammon is a traditional and very popular game in Bulgaria; therefore, it represents one of the aspects of Bulgarian identity in the film: a backgammon set is presented as a birthday gift, something that accompanies the protagonist's life, and reoccurring at the most important milestones in his life. In this film, backgammon acts as a metaphor for destiny, roots, nationality, and a means of inter-generational dialogue. Numerous flashing images of the dice in the car during the car crash stress once again the importance of luck and destiny. Furthermore, there is an image of the grandfather right after the car crash, which implies that he somehow sensed that something would go wrong, showing the deep spiritual connection with his family. The theme of premonition and emotional connection between the grandparents and their relatives, despite the distance between them, becomes even more apparent in the scene with Sladka (the grandmother), when she reveals that she has burnt her pastries, sensing that something bad was going to happen, namely the call from Germany about the car crash.

Returning to the roots of self-exoticism and the opposition of the civilised Europe and the wild chaotic Balkans, it is important to mention the depiction of Bulgarians as emotional people, always acting against the rules. In *The World*, for example, the grandfather effectively rejects the rules in the hospital – he is emotional and almost barbaric, breaking into his grandson's flat and using a stick to force him out of the hospital. Another self-critical depiction of the Bulgarians' inability to follow the rules is the scene with the car in *Operation SC*: everybody gets so emotional in a traffic jam that a group of men simply decide to turn a car over just to be able to move forward. It is possible that such an extreme response works as another representation of the chaos and confusion as well as a sense of despair in modern Bulgaria.

The self-exoticism trend continues in the visual representation of Bulgaria, an image that is frequently focused on material and visual objects, in order both to evoke nostalgia in the Bulgarian audience and create a visual spectacle for the international audience. Among these visual objects are the already mentioned images of food, furniture, fashion, architecture, and traditional customs. An example

of the latter is a representation of the traditional obituary, a traditional way of commemorating late family members in Bulgaria by hanging posters with photos and short poems on the walls, trees, doors and pillars in the local community. This is a very particular appeal to exoticism, as it is quite an odd custom, but extremely widespread in Bulgaria. *Operation SC* develops this theme further by displaying a typical Bulgarian party – a total spectacle featuring folk music, drinking, and dancing. Such a representation may be an exaggeration, but it, nevertheless fulfils the therapeutic function of cinema by providing a consensus on a coherent national identity image, by appealing to a sense of unity and restoring this lost sense of belonging.

The narrative of a lost or disrupted national identity is continued in the theme of immigration and shifting borders and identities. Trifonova argues that the majority of new Bulgarian films depict immigration as an inevitably traumatogenic experience, talking in particular about the film director of *The World* (2011: 218). However, it seems that this tendency has changed in recent years, as the concept of immigration has become more complex and polysemantic, especially in the films that are reflecting on the aftermath of the transition and the emerging need to integrate into a new, European context.

The two previously mentioned preconditions, namely the identity crisis after 1989 and the marginalization of Bulgaria within a European context, were enhanced even more by the fact that the Bulgarian media continuously covered any piece of news about Bulgaria in the western world. The media indulged in the need for Bulgarians to look for signs of acceptance, and their obsession with the western gaze (Iordanova, 1995). As a result, the negotiation of national identity on screen is built around the processes of self-exoticism and extreme othering directed at the more vulnerable ethnic minorities within the country.

#### 4.3. The Other Within: Projected Othering

This section looks at the way that Bulgarian national identity is manifested and mediated through the processes of projected othering in the post-1989 context. In his study of the history curriculum in Bulgarian schools, Pilbrow discusses that ironically the marginalisation of the minorities, such as the Turkish and Roma minorities, in Bulgaria acts as a defensive attempt to delineate Bulgarian identity and its Europeanness (the West) from the Orientalised Other (the East) as a

'cathartic measure, that serves to ennoble the dominant, Bulgarian culture' (1997: 64). Jordanova agrees that the image of the Roma minority in Balkan cinema is constructed as opposition to show the difference between 'native Bulgarians' (predominantly Europe-oriented) and the Roma (orientalised) (2008). Even though Bulgarian national identity is no longer threatened by any assimilatory forces, the perception of minority rights in Bulgaria remains negative. As a recent survey shows, even the minority rights already guaranteed by the Bulgarian government do not have the support of the majority of the population (Rechel, 2008: 334).

The notion of the 'Bulgarian ethnic model' first became prominent in the early 2000s, when the MRF party led by Ahmed Dogan noted that 'Bulgaria has achieved a model for the solution of minority problems unique for the Balkans' (cited in DeDominicis, 2011). Particularly, comparing and distancing Bulgaria from the conflicts in the Former Yugoslavian republic was crucial for Bulgarian international diplomacy prior to its accession to the European Union. The 'Bulgarian ethnic model' was used widely to stress the peaceful co-existence of multiple ethnic and religious minorities in Bulgaria, particularly emphasising the fact that there was no racism and discrimination in the country (Rechel, 2008). However, this is far from the truth, as numerous instances of racism and xenophobia have been documented by international organisations and national NGOs, in particular in the last five years (Rechel, 2008). At the same time, it seems that the popular idea of the peacefully coexistent nations within the 'Bulgarian Ethnic Model' is used by the political elites to avoid acknowledging and dealing with the issue of discrimination and hate crimes, thus aggravating the already difficult situation in which the refugees and ethnic minorities find themselves in modern Bulgaria.

It is hard to underestimate the crucial role that the mainstream media plays in constructing the negative image of the refugees and ethnic minorities in Bulgaria. It is also notable that these diverse groups have been merged into a homogenised Other that is marginalised, regardless of the specific ethnicity or national identity – the unifying characteristic of the multiple groups subjected to othering is their non-Bulgarianness and non-Europeanness.

A recent report by the Institute of Social Integration states that since a very small percentage of Bulgarian citizens have direct contact with foreigners, their primary source of information and opinion-shaping are the media, and the main speakers, such as active politicians, public figures, and party leaders. While this, unfortunately,



is a universal problem that is not unique to Bulgaria, it nevertheless should be studied in its unique local context in order to evaluate the specifics of the discourse used in the Bulgarian media. As the Institute of Social Integration notes, 'Hate speech is the main problem of the refugees in Bulgaria' (2017). Monitoring of 355 national and regional Bulgarian media outlets in spring of 2017 shows that the refugees are usually depicted as passive objects in the news, they are not allowed to voice their own opinions. The topic of the refugee crisis is particularly often used during election campaigns when the threatening image of the Other is repeatedly used to consolidate the electorate to vote for far-right populist policies by trying to 'instil fear, threat, mistrust' (Social Integration, 2017). An analysis of the stenograms of political speeches of the members of the parliament also shows that the refugees are presented as a threat to national security, described as 'invaders' (Krassimir Karakachanov - MP and leader of VMRO, Minister of Defense).

In an attempt to regulate the amount of hate speech in the mainstream media, the Bulgarian Association of European Journalists critiqued of the coverage of the most popular online media outlets. Their study demonstrated that the representation of Roma minorities and the refugees is very rarely positive, becoming even more radically negative during active election campaigns. Pointing out the extreme dehumanisation of the image of the Roma in the Bulgarian media, the study shows that hate speech still dominates in the coverage of any news regarding ethnic minorities or refugees (AEJ, 2017). Thus, in the public discourse, the asylum seekers remained passive objects that, nevertheless, pose a threat to national security, thus reinforcing 'a very visible exclusion of asylum seekers from participation in the political community of the state' (Nancheva, 2016: 550). Bulgaria, therefore, can be viewed as an example of a public space where an extreme discourse of othering dominates the mainstream media and politics. In her theory of the 'Other within', Neuburger states that the European opposition to Islam has been replicated in the Balkans and, since the Balkans were also orientalised as Western Europe's Other, this relationship has been inverted (2004).

Bhabha argues that the construction of the Other is central to the imagining of nations, and thus, there is nothing particularly unique to this process of projected othering in the Balkans (1994). Neuburger also argues that there is nothing predictable or inherently Bulgarian in the nationalism in Bulgaria. Rather, she says that 'all nationalisms have been historically about inclusion and exclusion and all

have claimed untold victims in the realisation of homogenising impulses' (2004, 7). Just as today, the spread of right-wing and nationalist exclusion discourses in Bulgaria should not be seen in isolation from nationalist movements in the UK, in the US, or Germany, France, Russia, or Hungary, for example. The similarities of these processes are often rooted in the common origins of the idea of a nationality imagined in its difference from the Other.

In the Bulgarian cinematic representations context, we can see some particular instances of projected othering, where Roma are blamed for being too 'mobile' and even 'too adaptable'. For example, in *Shmenti Capelli*, the adaptability of the Roma is criticised in the context of the transition. The film is the least inclusive in terms of the manifestation of ethnic nationalism – it is about Bulgarians, and everyone but ethnic Bulgarians is literally excluded from the narrative. Non-Bulgarian ethnicity is only mentioned at one point – and it results in projected othering when the characteristics supposedly inflicted on Bulgarians as Europe's Other are reversed onto the internal Other – the Roma in this case.

The only scene that mentions an ethnic minority is, however, one of the most important scenes of the opening of the film, because it essentially establishes the timeline of the whole film narrative. The scene shows the historical progression between 'before' and 'now', through the example of a road accident back then, immediately after the fall of communism, and the same road now, in the early 2010s. In the *before* scene, a car accident takes place on a typical road in Sofia, surrounded by high rise buildings and an abandoned building site. The accident results in a conflict, while the narrator adds 'It all took place at the border of two centuries and on the limit of human abilities', ironically commenting on the state of anxiety and anger that dominated Bulgarian society during the early transition. The next scene set in the *now* demonstrates that, although on the surface it might seem that everything has changed, in reality, everything has remained the same: 'It all started before... And continued now'. There is a traffic jam again and two men are wrestling on the ground fighting over something, while the narrator proclaims 'The time when we are all in a hurry and yet standing still', highlighting again the continuity of the transition and the hopeless sense that nothing can be changed.

In the meantime, a horse-carriage passes by, with a car attached to it. The carriage is driven by a man who is presumably of Romani origin. The narrator continues 'Only the most adaptable were able to move forward'. The music is ethnic

Romani, the men on the carriage are dancing, looking happy and waving to the people standing in the traffic jam as they move forward. As this brief reference to the ethnic minorities shows, they can only be framed as a contrast to the less adaptable Bulgarians. While it could be argued that being adaptable is not automatically equalled to a negative depiction, I would suggest that in this particular case, it is rather obvious that the Roma characters are portrayed in a generalised stereotypical manner. The men in the horse-carriage are violating the rules of the road but are able to get away with it, while all the other characters are left out and have to stay in the traffic jam. Even if in a concealed manner, such depiction indicates some level of everyday racism against the Roma minorities in Bulgaria.

*Mission London* also reveals a certain desire to project the un-European qualities to the Other that is not perceived as equal. In this case, the othering is directed at a more abstract category – the Third World countries in general, as opposed to the supposedly more civilised and, therefore, European, Bulgarians. During the celebratory dinner, the embassy staff sees on television that the real Queen is visiting an unspecified African country at the very same time. Their discussion reveals quite a racist view of a part of the world that is considered less civilised and, therefore, less valuable: ‘Could they send us a doppelganger? Can you imagine, they are not crazy to send the real queen to these monkeys’. This scene is, of course, ironic and exposes the racism within Bulgarians, because the fake Queen is sitting at the celebratory dinner in the Bulgarian embassy, while the real one is, indeed, on a trip to Africa. This scene parodies the Bulgarians’ need to construct an Other that is somehow less European than they are, in order to sustain their own discourse of a return to a once lost European identity that was taken from them during socialist times.

A similar nationalist discourse emerged in the focus groups as well, revealing just how common such ideas are. A similar political framing of blame is used when talking about the Roma. Paradoxically, they are considered more privileged because they are believed to receive more state support than ethnic Bulgarians:

- The future of Bulgaria is not to breed and feed the Gypsies to sustain the demographic growth. They are everywhere – the Gypsies. I don’t support them, them because they are lazy... (Participant 18, 76)
- They get a thousand leva [of benefits] every month (Participant 19, 75).

- Yes. They *are still people*, I don't have anything against them, they are people after all. But we have to support *our people*, and instead, *our kids are forced to go abroad* to survive (Participant 18, 76).

In another group, one participant also stated that the people abroad are so different that they cannot even imagine stealing a duck from the park, referring to an episode from *Mission London*, while the Bulgarians and the Roma take advantage of such naivety:

They cannot imagine why you would have to kill the ducks, sell them to the Chinese or whatever. This would never even cross their mind. Think of all the problems they have with their social services and the Bulgarians who abuse the benefits system. Whether they are of Roma origin, or not... (Participant 3, 40).

This participant mentioned Roma in the context of them creating a 'bad name' for the Bulgarians in Europe, essentially projecting the barbarian traits on them, as they become the scapegoats in the rigid system of the existing East/West asymmetry. Interestingly, the topic of national minorities is largely peripheral in the films, however, the theme nevertheless emerged in the discussions in the focus groups. This, once again, suggests that the negotiation and re-negotiation of a national imagination are impossible without reconsidering the role of the Other. Furthermore, it could be argued that the definition of one's national boundaries comes from situating and negotiating the nation's place between the two binary oppositions – Europeanness and Balkanness. I argue that as the result of this negotiation, a stratification and projecting of the national inferiority complexes on the even more vulnerable groups of the internal Others takes place.

At the same time, at least two of the discussions indicate the negotiation in terms of projected othering, when the perceived negative traits of the semi-periphery are projected onto a more vulnerable periphery. When discussing the film *Mission London*, the participants reacted most obviously to the typical Bulgarian national trait – the desire to outsmart everybody else and to earn money without working. Interestingly, this is the particular feature that they criticised in the Roma:

- I think there are many other factors in Bulgaria that make a wrong impression abroad. The Gypsies<sup>3</sup>, for example (Participant 4, 31).
- Yes, the Gypsies (Participant 2, 28).
- When they are caught stealing, no one says 'I am a Gypsy', they say 'I am Bulgarian' (Participant 4, 31).
- This is making a wrong impression (Participant 2, 28).
- I see this in myself sometimes... It is the same when we think of Kosovo, about Albania. I can remember how we perceived them, as if we were expecting to see some cannibals there (Participant 4, 31).

Projected nesting orientalism is evident in this dialogue where the participant admits his condescending attitudes towards the more balkanised neighbours. Interestingly, although it is obvious that the participants were aware of their own views towards the other Balkan states, their view of the Roma was not included in this self-reflective narrative. Other examples of contrasting Europe to the Balkans can be seen in this comment:

- We all have a similar mentality in the Balkans (Participant 12, 43).
- I mean, all countries from this part of the Balkans. Slovenia and Croatia are different. Their mentality is different; they have a more civil society. I would say that Bulgaria is closer to the Balkans anyway (Participant 9, 47).

Here, the notion of 'lagging in time' is, thus, adding the temporal dimension (Regressive Past versus Progressive Present) to the spatial dimension (East/West and South/North) of the *catching up* discourse (Bhabha 1994, Tlostanova 2010). Thus, both forms of modernity that existed and influenced the processes of national identity formation in Bulgaria – the socialist (before) and the capitalist (now) resulted in a deeply rooted acceptance of the binary approach to national identity. Agreeing with Tlostanova, Sandru, and Todorova, I argue that there is a potential for alternative dialogic ties in the more hybrid and fluid national identity representations in cinema. The following section will explore how in some of the case study films, the hybrid identities are negotiated in more complex and non-binary terms, deconstructing the discourses of othering, and challenging the status quo.

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<sup>3</sup> Used a derogatory term *tsigani* instead of Romi, Roma

#### 4.4. Challenging the Othering Discourse: Possibility of Hybridity

Hybridity, hybrid identities, and border crossing are crucial concepts to use in the attempts to understand any society in transition. There has been an ongoing debate surrounding the notion of hybridity, and Pieterse describes the subsequent critique as the 'anti-hybridity backlash' (2001: 219). Marotta, for instance, argues that boundaries between societies are still unavoidable, despite the claims of the overbearing fluidity and mobility of the postmodern world (2008: 309). Drawing on the work of Marotta, who suggests that boundaries are essential to 'the very constitution' (2008: 301) of the hybrid subject, in the present research I define hybridity as a process, or an act of border crossing, most likely a vernacular and transgressive act, for which to happen the existence of boundaries is a necessary condition. At the same time, I refuse to see boundaries as stable entities with fixed meaning that cannot be affected by the dynamic of the border crossing. In a similar vein, Pieterse (2001) defines hybridity as a transcendence of binary dichotomies, which does not necessarily suggest avoiding or destroying boundaries as a whole. Instead, as Pieterse argues, hybridity and boundaries coexist in a state of negotiation, highlighting the vital ability of hybridity to problematise boundaries (2001: 220). Hybridity cannot be restrained to just national, ethnic boundaries, and it could also mean transcending the boundaries of time or heteronormativity. As Berghahn notes, hybridity provides a problematisation and critique of normativity by offering an alternative to the hegemony ruled by the dichotomies of 'us' and 'them', where 'in-betweenness can also be understood in positive terms as "having the best of both worlds"' (2012: 133).

The approach proposed by Pieterse and Berghahn, however, is not without its limitations. The idea of the liminality of hybridity and its unique place in-between might suggest that certain power politics and inequality are involved. I would suggest that at some points, the overly optimistic perception of the possibilities of hybridity can be blind to the existing inequalities on both sides of the dichotomy. For instance, Pieterse emphasises the role of the hybrid as a Trickster, who has some kind of Trickster knowledge, 'in which the Trickster is the joker in the pack, the jester, the fool, the shape-shifter who does not take seriously what all society around regards as sacred rules' (2001: 239). I would argue instead that border crossing is more than just an exception or a freak accident, but rather, an everyday practice that is lived through the mundane experiences of the people on both sides of the border. Thus,

I argue, the border crossing process should not be automatically placed outside normativity, the everyday, the ordinary.

I also suggest that hybridity and hybrids are more than just a liminal space. Instead, Burns, for example, proposes to view hybridity as an alternative rather than liminal space: 'the notion of being trapped "between two cultures" is rejected in favour of marking out a "third space" of cultural hybridity that holds out the promise of a more liberated society' (2007: 11). I would argue that this approach applies to the Bulgarian case, as it proposes a critique of the claim that Bulgaria is still stuck in *prehoda*, remaining forever in the liminal space in-between.

As Neuburger states, no hybridity is accepted by the Western version of modernity. Nevertheless, this does not result in a complete lack of hybridity (2004). She argues that in some cases, hybridity can present an alternative to the hegemonic colonial discourse. Morozov and Rumelli add that othering can be a positive, constructive practice, which can even be considered 'a hybridising practice involving both positive and negative representations' (2012: 32). It is clear that within the East/West dichotomy, this practice is asymmetrical. As Goldsworthy notes, 'any set of values can be described in the metaphorical taxonomy, but that the superiority of Europe in opposition to the Balkans tends to remain a constant (2003).

The approach that I propose is a more dynamic one, which would be able to acknowledge the role of the symbolic East in the changing of the political context after 1989: acknowledging that not only the perception of the East has changed after the Yugoslavian conflict, but also the perception of the West has changed since it has lost its romanticised unreachable charm after the opening of the borders and the accession to the EU. Another point to be considered is that both East and West are symbolic structures rather than geographical. As history shows on a regional level, these boundaries can and are shifted depending on the current political and economic needs of certain nationalist discourse. What remains constant is not only the dominant role of the West, however elusive its boundaries may be, but also the vulnerable role of the minorities on this borders. The process of othering gains its momentum when there are any manifestations of hybridity and in-betweenness.

The concept of intercultural cinema coined by Laura Marks (2000) seems to be useful for this study, even though I will explain why I prefer the concept of *cinema of intercultural negotiation* instead. I am using the idea of interculturality in my study,

because, as Marks notes, 'intercultural' refers to the role of cinema as a mediator, suggesting fluidity and possibility of change manifested through a 'movement between one culture and another' and implies that the dominant culture is not a static background for the unfolding of the cultural minorities – it is all seen as a fluidity and dynamic dialogue (2000: 30). At the same time, my focus on the negotiational aspect of cinema provides an opportunity to view the encounters mediated by cinema as dialogical, vernacular acts of border crossing. Since the idea of intercultural cinema presupposes an equal dialogue, and I wish to emphasise the relationships of power that are influencing this dialogue, I suggest that the idea of negotiation is more suitable to reflect that the dialogues between Bulgaria, its perceived core (Europe and the symbolic West), and the other within are not equal. The concept of negotiation, therefore, emphasises the focus on the numerous unequal relationships of power, influenced not only by economic but also political and cultural factors.

In *Tilt*, the theme of migration is central to the plot. The story focuses on a group of teenagers in the late 1980s Sofia who dream of opening a bar named Tilt. They sit around in their secret basement, listening to the *Sex Pistols*, watching illegally smuggled videos from the West, and playing games. The depiction of the basement can be described as the essential idealised view on the West as a source of forbidden freedom and democracy. Interestingly, the choice of *Sex Pistols* seems significant as symbol of a rebellion against the system, be it a capitalist or a socialist one.

Everything turns out badly when one of the teenagers, Stashe, meets a girl, Becky, who turns out to be a daughter of a party member and head of the police. Becky's father thinks that Stashe is a bad influence because of his liberal views. During a police raid organised by Becky's father, the secret basement is discovered. The teenagers end up in jail but then are let go on the condition that Stashe and Becky never see each other again. Instead, they decide to escape Bulgaria and run to the GDR. They are, however, caught on the border, and Stashe is threatened by the police who essentially force him to leave Bulgaria and never contact Becky again.

The main characters in *Tilt* act as 'carriers' of Bulgarian identity abroad, struggling to fit in and depicted as outcasts. They can only afford to live in a small apartment with a big group of other immigrants, their lives are miserable, and they



dream of going back one day. Their longing for home is obvious in the scenes where they all gather around the television to catch the latest news about Bulgaria. Having left Bulgaria without being able to say goodbye, Stashe desperately tries to contact his mother to let her know that everything is fine.

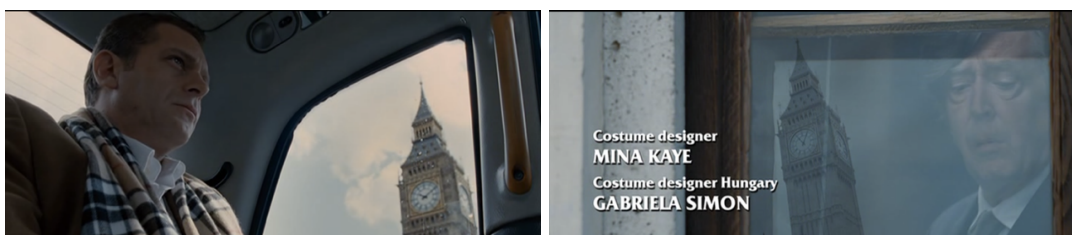
After the fall of the Berlin wall, they finally are allowed to go back. Those who return home from Germany become the hybrid carriers of the projected Western Gaze. The universalism of the story does not diminish its significance in the representation of Bulgarian national identity, but rather, shows a different, less stereotyped version of Bulgaria. In particular, the director of the film notes that, while the film is international in its theme and style, it still clearly situated in the specific Bulgarian context:

The characters have their stories; they share a particular time and a society where they lived. I don't think that the only way to portray the essentially Bulgarian is through showing cows, sheep, a village and the bell tower over it. The language is Bulgarian; the people are Bulgarian. In this sense, of course, this is a Bulgarian film (Chouchkov, 2017).

The hybridity of these characters lies in their universalism; this story could have happened anywhere in the post-communist region, and yet, it happens in Bulgaria, bringing together the specific post-1989 Bulgarian context and the commonalities of the transitional experience in other countries. As Chouchkov suggests, through its universalism, the film challenges the stereotypical Balkanised depiction of Bulgaria in the rural, idyllic settings. Instead, the film draws on the common urban experiences of the transition that Bulgaria shares with other post-communist countries.

The film *Mission London* (Mitovsky, 2010) was not initially included in the case study sample for the present research since it does not deal with the topic of the communist past and the post-1989 transition directly. Nevertheless, the film was so popular with the Bulgarian audiences that it often emerged both in the focus groups and the interviews, in particular when the themes of national identity and the Bulgarian mentality came up in the discussions. It was my decision to include an analysis of this film in the selection, in order to reflect on and highlight the importance of the audience in this study.

The following scene offers another interesting perspective on the way that the Eastern Gaze can be reversed through cinematic narratives in *Mission London*. The first time we see Varadin, he is arriving in London in a black cab, looking at Westminster and Big Ben through the window, unaware that he is simultaneously being watched by Mr Carver – the Minister of Defence. The hierarchy is quite apparent in this scene, as Mr Carver is literally above everyone else, hiding behind a curtain in the parliament building and looking down, while Varadin is in the car down below.



*Figure 8 – Varadin in a cab, overlooked by Carver, Mission London*

The dynamic is somewhat reversed after the already mentioned European summit when Mr Carver takes the ambassador to his home and talks to him while also getting drunk. Varadin is interested in this friendship because he has heard that Mr. Carver arranged a meeting with someone from the Royal family: it turns out he only met a doppelganger, but this remains unclear until later in the film.

Meanwhile, Varadin appears to be the only rational character in the film, because he is westernised and looks like a stereotypical English gentleman, wearing a Burberry scarf and looking at everything surrounding him as a distant observer. The film starts with an outtake from a self-hypnosis video of a technique that Varadin uses to calm down when the world around him becomes too chaotic and irrational. By slowly counting down from one hundred to one, Varadin maintains his calm distant position to the rest of the world, however disturbing and frustrating it becomes.

Although he is just a tool, and has to obey the president and his wife, essentially the audience could identify with Varadin as the main character and also view the surroundings from this slightly distanced and, therefore, more critical and self-reflective perspective. This perspective is reinforced by the fact that Varadin remains sober in the scene with Carver, while the supposedly more civilised minister is drunk and falls asleep.

It can be argued that Varadin subverts the stereotypical Bai Ganyo image of the Bulgarian abroad – instead of embarrassing himself in front of the more civilised foreigners, Varadin is an idealised model of a genuinely European Bulgarian who does not have to trick the Westerners in order to become equal to them. Furthermore, Varadin is the only ‘sane’ character through whom we get to witness the madness of his world. He seems to be already more civilised and rational than some of the members of both sides of the world: he is calm, in control, and distanced, conforming to the stereotype about a typical Westerner. This allows him to be an observer rather than a hybrid – he can be viewed as an example of an anti-self-exoticising character. Thus, the film might have the opposite effect of self-exoticism – it presents the tropes of unification, the universalisation of experience and humanisation through its satirical take. The film, thus, demonstrates the similarities and coherences, using Bhabha’s terminology, rather than differences and extremities. It is suggested that national ideas are indeed nothing more than a) complexes of inferiority b) a struggle for power and c) a manifestation of political interest. National identity construction is depicted as something artificial, politicised, and imposed from above so that we are able to see the similarities between ‘not-there’ Bulgaria and the ‘true-Europe’ Britain more than their differences.

The exaggerated absurdist humour is crucial in the film – it not only highlights some traumatic conflict points of national negotiation but also makes their needlessness obvious. The absurd events at the embassy dinner once again highlight the excessiveness and artificiality of the constructed imaginary spaces of East and West. The whole process of adaptation and catching up with the West becomes the object of parody, especially when highlighted by the way that the Western characters themselves behave. Adaptation, thus, it is not depicted as something necessary, on the contrary, since everyone is a part of this absurd game, then perhaps the need to catch up is also artificially imposed.

Nevertheless, this contrast of power and the desire of Bulgaria to be recognised as truly European is continuously ridiculed in the film. When Varadin first meets the representative of the agency ‘Famous Connections’ at the embassy, they are being served sandwiches that look like a stereotypical image from the popular Soviet cookbook, *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* (1952).



*Figure 9 – Dinner at the Bulgarian Embassy, Mission London*



*Figure 10 – Sandwiches served during the dinner, Mission London*

The representative makes a striking comment about the food: 'I'm afraid that these sandwiches prove that you have a *long way to go to catch up with the rest of Europe*. I am not a snob, but as far as sandwiches are concerned there are certain sacred standards for this country'. This comment is particularly ironic coming from an agent who locates celebrity lookalikes to satisfy his clients' erotic fantasies. Nevertheless, it also exposes some complexes that Bulgarians have: the ambassador asks his cook to 'do some research' and make 'proper sandwiches' to avoid embarrassment next time. On the other hand, the absurdity of this comment and its irony could be seen as a critique of the acceptance of the perceived artificial standards imposed on Bulgaria from the outside. The irrationality of these imposed demands is challenged through the satirical appeal of the scene and, thus, the subversive potential of the absurdist humour is fulfilled.

Another humorous commentary on the Bulgarians, or rather, all post-communist countries is expressed later in the film by the same agents, who state: 'They are really damaged over there, *they've got no taboos left after the collapse of the Berlin Wall*'. This seems to be a reflective and critical view of the East on itself through an imagined, mediated Western gaze, taken to the extreme. At the same time, the subversive power of both of these scenes lies in its satirical approach – both times the criticism of the East is voiced by characters who do not hold much power or legitimacy themselves. On the contrary, their own moral stance is questionable and, thus, their judgement cannot be considered authoritative or competent.

Both comments on the ridiculous standards that are felt to be imposed on Bulgaria by the West, or the 'true' Europe, suggest a sharp critique of the *catching up* discourse. The attempts of the Bulgarian characters to adapt and comply to the demands are ridiculed rather than really admired. The decolonial potential of *Mission London*, thus, lies in its subversive, satirical depiction of the negotiation dynamic between the older and the newer European Union states. The deidentification and universalisation power in the film is also realised through the tools of absurdist humour, challenging and questioning the insurmountability of the East/West divide.

#### 4.5. *Mission London*: Focus Group Discussions

*Mission London* offers a refreshingly complex and nuanced picture, exposing the overlapping and ambiguous essence of the constructed ideas of Europeaness, Balkanness, and Bulgarianness. However, the potential of the common experience of postcolonialism and the Western gaze does not guarantee a feeling of solidarity between semi-periphery and periphery. It is not enough for Bulgarian cinema to look back at the West; it is also necessary for it to look at those on whom they are projecting their Otherness. Unfortunately, these films are still rare in the Bulgarian film landscape, especially among the films that deal with the socialist past. The question of who the actual Other is, if Bulgarians are indeed European, remains too complex and problematic to answer.

It is useful to evaluate how the focus group participants responded to these mediated representations of Europeaness. The first glimpse reveals that there is space for a more critical account of the Europe/East dynamic. In particular, some of the focus groups gradually revealed a level of reflection on fluidity in Bulgaria's place

in the European terrain, thus revealing the film's capacity to inspire dialogue and self-reflection. Some reflected that the reason behind the pronounced necessity to steal is economic:

I think that the problem with us is that the Bulgarian is poor, basically. And when a Bulgarian is poor, he can think of so many mischiefs, it's unbelievable. I think if people were more ... If they lived more normally, had better income and a more normal standard of living, maybe they would not think how to trick England, France (Participant 2, 28)

They were also quite critical about the outcomes and the justice of emigration to Western Europe. Almost in every group, the idea of the happy future in the West was challenged by the participants, who stated that 'When we go to the West, we work at the lowest levels' (Participant 7, 23) and 'I have to tell you that I think that it does not come naturally for Bulgarians to live in other countries, they always want to return home. [whomever you ask ... Bulgarians are looking for the Bulgarian]' (Participant 15, 62).

Not surprisingly, in the focus group discussions, some participants defensively pointed out that the Bulgarians are 'underestimated' by the West. They also noted that they are being made to believe that Bulgarians are lazy, because they are just being paid less and, therefore, exploited:

This is all part of some plan, they are trying to convince us that we are lazy. In Europe, they are getting big salaries because they work hard and we do not work enough. The truth is just the opposite - we're working and we're working very hard! When they come from Europe to work here, we see the difference. They work ten times less than us, have their requirements, and if anything goes wrong, they refuse to work. While we are working without complaining (Participant 15, 62).

It is clear in the discussions above that in these more critical reflections, the audience refuses to automatically accept the natural logic of othering, where Europe is always at the top of the hierarchy. Portraying the process of national identity negotiation through a satirical lens, *Mission London* highlights the absurdity of some of the claims imposed by the East/West inequality and helps the audience challenge the logic of the *catching up* discourse.

In *Mission London*, the characters are hybrid, ambiguous and avoiding the obvious binaries while making them excessive and visible. The ambassador Varadin is a pragmatic figure, a balanced character who is relatable without the need to be ridiculed. Satire is not used to devalue the character but instead exposes the inconsistencies and the structural inequalities. As a hybrid, Varadin does not take on the role of a trickster. Instead he offers an alternative type of a *figure on the boundaries* (Tlostanova, 2007) that does not require a marginalised or ironic status, but still can be a vehicle of border thinking. Thus, border thinking is adopted in *Mission London* through exploring the boundaries of Europeanness, the Bulgarian desire to be accepted as European, the fluidity of borders between Bulgaria and other Balkan or Eastern European countries.

The subversive potential of the film is realised in its tendency of unification – within the narrative, and no one is safe. Perhaps, what is highlighted most is that there is no need to adapt – everyone is similar anyway: the British characters are just as ridiculous in their agency of celebrities as are the embassy clerks who show their ability to outsmart the system. The absurdity of the standards that the characters of the film are struggling to follow challenges the self-colonising and self-deprecating image of the Bulgarian. Furthermore, the very stereotype about the insurmountable difference between the East and the West is challenged. It can be argued, therefore, that *Mission London* is a part of the cinema of intercultural negotiation. Using satire and absurdism, the film shows the interchangeable perceptions of the East and the West who both demonstrate the tendency to exoticise the Other in their differences. Nevertheless, because of the excessive amount of absurdity, the idea of the East/West divide is challenged.

#### 4.6. Grassroots Initiatives as Counter-hegemonic Alternatives: Interzones and the Cinema of Negotiation

The dialogic essence of the cinema of intercultural negotiation seems suitable for the analysis of the Bulgarian case, not only when we talk on a broader level about the sense of European solidarity. Furthermore, I argue that the concept of interzones applies to even smaller local spaces, including interactions between different cultures within one particular urban space, such as Sofia.

It is crucial to study the specific ways that constitute this encounter with the Other, in order to evaluate its potential in negotiating diversity. On the one hand,

there is the understanding of the socialising power of cinema as a place that brings people together in a limited space for an experience of uninterrupted film consumption. This premise is, however, challenged by unconventional cinematic spaces, that not only subvert the usual function within the urban context, but also create more possibilities for a discussion and interaction. It is clear then that the public sphere is understood as a dynamic entity, that is being constructed constantly by its agents. Therefore, in order to challenge the hegemonic discourse of hate speech and xenophobia, new public spaces are emerging as alternative opportunities to promote dialogue and negotiation. The emergence of new spaces requires new ways of mediation, including cinema of intercultural negotiation.

The films analysed above provide some particular examples of intercultural negotiation on the level of the narrative, while potentially, the engagement of the audience can be reached with the help of construction of physical interzones where public dialogue might happen. In order to argue and assume that this dialogue is indeed the result of viewing such films, more direct engagement with the audiences is required to evaluate to what extent it actually impels its audiences to rethink hegemonic cultural and political imaginaries in the region (Kovačević, 2013: 197).

As Deiana notes in her study of the critical potential of Sarajevo Film festival, we need to acknowledge that the audiences of cinema and festival goers might already be privileged and 'inclined to engage in dialogue and cultural exchange' (2017: 14). Nevertheless, even though these encounters with the audiences might be temporary and privileged, they still remain an important experience of intercultural exchange. One particular example of such an interaction was the screening of *The Good Postman* at The House of Cinema in Sofia. In 2017, The House of Cinema organised a series of events including screenings of films about the refugees and events where refugees and their families were invited to the cinema. The series of events called Building Bridges Between Communities was aimed at establishing a link between various diverse communities of Sofia, including that of the most vulnerable groups, including the refugees and Roma.

### ***The Good Postman (Hristov, 2016)***

The film follows the campaign of the local postman Ivan in the remote Bulgarian village of Great Dervent where he is running for mayor. Ivan proposes a scheme which includes integrating refugees into the village, providing them with land and



homes in order to bring the ageing and dying village back to life. The director, Tonislav Hristov, uses a semi-fictionalised script, that combines documentary and fiction style, whilst leaving the camera to observe the unfolding of the events. This technique allows for highlighting the numerous contrasts surrounding the problem of the refugees, including the *private* versus the *public*, the *national* versus the *local*, *us* versus the *others* and, last but not the least, the *west* versus the *east* (exploring it through some manifestations of communist nostalgia in the village). These contrasting and somehow contradicting values become evident after a brief examination of the beliefs and motivations of the village inhabitants.

The villagers are represented as an ordinary group of people, who turn out to be easily manipulated and bribed (the pro-communist character providing them with free food to attract the voters). Their views are by no means radical or set in stone, as far as we can see from the documentary – instead, they are represented to the viewer as bystanders, as ordinary working people, more bothered by the difficulties of their day-to-day life than some potential threat of a refugee invasion. Nevertheless, we can follow how dangerously easily these people can be manipulated when someone with even a bit of authority engages in a political discussion with them. Moreover, this manipulation is strengthened by the only media they have access to – the mainstream television and newspapers. Their poor understanding of the refugee problem is evidenced in the exchange between Ivan's opponent Halachev and one of the villagers: 'Not only Syrians come. Afghans and Taliban come through here as well, and who knows who else...' [...] 'Ivan wants to welcome Syrians here! I disagree. Here? Syrians? Why? Is it not enough for him that we already have gipsies?'

While Ivan visits one household after another trying to convince the villagers to vote for him, their nostalgia for the communist past is gradually revealed, as demonstrated in the interaction between the protagonist Ivan and his main opponents – pro-communist Putin sympathiser and the current mayor Veska, who could not care less about the refugees sitting in her office and listening to *chalga*<sup>4</sup>. In his address to the potential voters, the pro-Russian mayor candidate Halachev says: 'Comrades! I want internet for everyone! Like in Putin's Russia! We need communism'. His nostalgia for communism is gradually transformed into right-wing populism, as he repeats his mantra 'Bulgaria for Bulgarians' and even states that

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<sup>4</sup> Bulgarian music genre, also known as 'pop-folk', or ethno, became popular in the 1990s.

the Syrian refugees are 'worse than gypsies'.

Ivan and Halachev, surprisingly, find common ground in their despair and inability to change anything in the village – the current mayor Vesa wins again thanks to her personal connections and nepotism. Their regained sense of togetherness serves as a reminder of the old days when a cooperation against the system and its bureaucracy was at times the only option.

Showing the life of the village through the East/West binaries mentioned above provides an interesting insight into the context of the xenophobic sentiments in modern Bulgaria: even though most of the inhabitants of the village can agree that the refugees are 'just people', their judgement is very much affected by the media coverage of the refugee crisis.

A very significant scene and a turning point in the film shows the villagers gathered around the television watching the news together and having disputes about the interpretations of the events. The report they are watching is the shocking story of 71 refugees suffocating to death in a truck, being smuggled through the EU border by a Bulgarian driver. It is the first time that we see a change of heart in the villagers in *The Good Postman*, as they begin to realise the stakes and the risks that the refugees take to escape their home countries: despite the differences in their attitudes towards the refugees, the villagers' reaction to the news story is the same – that of shock. This experience of the sudden revelation that there are kids among those people who choose deliberately to risk everything they have for the opportunity to escape the war zone brings the villagers together. Similarly, in one of the scenes, a teenager tries to persuade her parents that the depiction of the refugees as 'monsters' on TV is not accurate because they are 'also human, they are just like us'.

*The Good Postman* can be considered an example of a cinema of intercultural negotiation, because the gaps between the national and the global are not only exposed, but also actively challenged directly through the discussions held by Ivan and the villagers on screen.

Interestingly, *The Good Postman* not only offers a critique of the state of the villages in Bulgaria now, but also comments on the role of the media in shaping and framing the public opinion about the refugees. With the village serving as a

metaphor representative of Bulgaria's attitudes towards the refugees as a whole, the film shows how easily can the balance be destructed and how conflict can emerge through the cracks of the extremely poor and troubled post-communist society, where the main goal remains the same – to find someone to blame for the failures of the system. The *Good Postman* has the potential to generate a more humanitarian appeal – through deindividualisation and an appeal to see the Other, first and above of all, as a human being (before any other identity): the exaggerated national and political identities are also made fun of. The ending of the film is less optimistic but perhaps more pragmatic, as it shows that the only way for Ivan and Halachev to change something is to help to smuggle the Syrians across the border. Despite their opposing views, they are able to unite at the end of the film, which could be considered as a more positive outcome. The role of the postman as an ambassador of human rights in the village shows an inspiring, even if sometimes discouraging, path of social activists in Bulgaria. Looking at the rural regions of Bulgaria, this film creates a much-needed connection between the capital Sofia and the remote rural areas, where cinema theatres are non-existent after the post-1989 privatisation of the cinema industry.

### ***The House of Cinema as an interzone***

The powerful potential of cinema as a storytelling tool lies in its ability to create relatable stories and provide a ground for reflection, dialogue and negotiation. I argue that, combined with the choice of particular films that encourage intercultural negotiation, The House of Cinema as a space itself can be viewed as an interzone on the urban landscape of Sofia. The House of Cinema is situated on the border of two different 'worlds': the most politically, economically and culturally significant area of the city centre and the so-called Arab Quarter. The area of the Vitosha Boulevard and the central Serdika metro station is the main shopping and tourist vein of the city, while this part of the capital is also an important area politically with the Parliament building and the former House of the Party just around the corner. In terms of religion, the square above the Serdika station is informally known as The Square of Tolerance, an area where four temples of different religions are situated in a very close proximity, including the Catholic Cathedral of St Joseph, the Eastern Orthodox St. Nedelya Church, the Sofia Synagogue and the main Banya Bashi Mosque.

The Arab Quarter traditionally was an area inhabited by Muslim immigrants, and in the years starting from 2012 these streets have seen a new influx of refugees and migrants. While there have been numerous rumours that the quarter is not a safe place, in 2016 a journalist investigation by Nova TV (a commercial channel) explored the stereotypes and beliefs that people have about the Arab Quarter, and came to the conclusion, that 'Probably, the Arab Quarter is now the safest place in the capital', mainly due to the large numbers of police forces sent to guard these streets against any potential 'threat' (NOVA TV, 2016).

In my interview, Hristo Hristosov, the programme manager of The House of Cinema points out that in the context of the rising amount of hate speech in the media and political discourse, most Bulgarians still do not have any direct contact with the refugees. As Hristosov observed, the Bulgarian families are often 'educated by the television and lacking critical thinking'. The only knowledge they receive comes from media, while the Arab Quarter (though not officially a ghetto, as Philipovtsi, for instance) remains isolated from the rest of the city. Hristosov says that the screenings in The House of Cinema are aimed at bridging this gap by organising events that would promote the integration of the refugees and their families. Refugees and whole families of refugees are invited to these events: 'by inviting families, we show that there are more similarities than differences between "us" and "them", there is a sense of acceptance, challenging the overall feeling of fear' (Hristosov, 2017). In particular, Hristosov points out the importance of the location of the cinema and its role in the local community is highlighted: 'it is on the verge of the Arab Quarter where the refugees live now. So, the role of cinema is also that of creating a safe space for interaction' (Hristosov, 2017).

Therefore, the audiences are not only invited to visit the premises of the Arab Quarter to make sure that the place is as safe as any other quarter in Sofia, but they are also sharing a common viewing space with the Other in the room of the movie theatre. The audience thus is encountering the Other on a broader scale on 'their' territory but is also sharing a more intimate experience of common viewing practice. By sharing a peaceful and entertaining activity, the audience becomes united both by the physical limitations of the cinema and the symbolic space of the film and its narrative. This last aspect is also reflected in the programme selection that aims at showing more films telling the stories of the refugees, including but not limited to *The Good Postman*.

I argue that cinema spaces have the potential to become public spaces and induce a dialogue challenging the hegemonic xenophobic discourses prominent in media and mainstream politics. As the present research shows, these discourses are connected to the global tendencies during and after the recent refugee crisis, but in the Bulgarian case, they are also deeply rooted in the political and economic difficulties of *prehoda*.

The interview with Hristosov highlighted that the role of cinema as a common viewing activity in itself could act as a unifying factor. The dark, intimate space of the cinema hall makes the encounter with the Other possible in a 'safe space', where 'they' have the potential to become 'us'. Defying the lack of information around the refugees and the lack of actual contact with the Other, such initiatives act as a counter-hegemonic strategy, which seems particularly effective due to its location (in the Arab Quarter of the city centre) and setting (a small community cinema rather than a large multiplex). The choice of film, of course, has its essential role in the framing of a discussion about the refugees and inspiring an intercultural dialogue. It should be acknowledged, thus, that without a certain engagement with the topic of the problematic clashes of identities in post-communist Bulgaria, the negotiation and dialogue would not have been possible. The depiction of a polarised society modelled in a small abandoned village shows once again the role of the media in inducing hate and fear. At the same time, the film includes an attempt for political activism, showing a more optimistic route, significantly different from the bleak picture painted by the other media such as the press and television.

#### 4.7. Conclusion

The polarisation on both internal (who are we?) and external (how do we compare ourselves to the rest of the world?) levels remains an important factor in today's Bulgaria. The incoherencies and anxieties about national identity are present in the new Bulgarian cinema as tensions within national identity, its problematic and contested links with the past, as well as the constant negotiation between 'us' and 'them'. The depiction of national identity in new Bulgarian cinema relies strongly on the sense of belonging to, or being excluded from, the European or Balkan context. After the fall of the regime and, more recently, after joining the European Union, Bulgaria is facing numerous challenges in constructing its new national identity. Being on the margins of Europe and often viewed as the Other of

the West, Bulgarians are associating themselves with European values even more, as a means of resisting this marginalisation.

Previously criticised for a lack of hybridity (Trifonova, 2011), new Bulgarian cinema is shifting to express a more universal appeal in the recent years. The nation is depicted as a more dynamic entity, which is building its new identity as a response to the recent history of the transition. Moreover, the metaphorical use of the theme of migration helps to reflect on the complex marginalised role of Bulgaria in Europe. New cinema becomes a place of negotiating the present and the future, and to express anxieties and insecurities about the place of Bulgaria within a broader European context.

Nevertheless, the negotiation of national identity cannot be seen in isolation from the political frameworks. It is evident, therefore, that the building of national identity is constructed through the processes of exclusion and inclusion. Cinema exposes these points of negotiation, facilitating a symbolic conversation between the imagined core (the abstract idea of Europe and the West) and the periphery (Bulgaria), but also between the semi-periphery (Bulgaria) and the periphery including its multiple Others (Roma, refugees, migrants).

Some case study films, such as *Shmenti Capelli*, provide a self-exoticising image of the Bulgarian and Balkan self in contrast with the civilised and modernised European West. Interestingly, these films are also the ones that engage in the discourses of projected othering towards the more vulnerable ethnic minority groups – such films project and shift the processes of othering from Bulgaria to the internal or external Others of the Bulgarians. Nevertheless, there are also alternative, more hybrid and dynamic representations of national identity in other films, such as *Mission London* and *The Good Postman*. These films are still negotiating nationality in terms of East/West and Us/Them but in a much more critical and self-aware way. The non-inclusive discourses of Otherness are criticised through the means of absurdism and satire and a more universalising perspective, which focuses on the intercultural similarities rather than the differences. I argue that, despite being a comedy and a commercial blockbuster, *Mission London* has the potential to challenge the mainstream discourse of projected othering in Bulgaria. Meanwhile, *The Good Postman* in its narrative offers an alternative way of advocating for otherness rather than being afraid of it. Both films can be seen as examples of cinema of intercultural negotiation.

However, as the discussions in the focus groups show, it is not enough to assume the engagement of the audiences to challenge the already existing structures of projected othering. These structures have existed for a long time now, so they became so engraved in the social fabric that they have been perceived as the only possible hegemonic structure. Projected othering seems to be accepted quite uncritically, which shows the continuity and rootedness of these practices. Even though, as the analysis shows, some films provide examples of universalism, hybridity and promote humanitarian values, it is not always enough: most of the focus groups still included divisive comments and strong binary oppositions. Moreover, the cinema to negotiate the position of the less privileged and more vulnerable minority groups (created by these groups themselves and from their perspective) in Bulgaria is yet to be produced.

I suggest that the cinema of intercultural negotiation can only realise its full potential when some crucial conditions are met. These conditions include not only negotiations in terms of hybrid and diverse cinematic narratives and images, but also quite literally, cinema providing physical spaces of encountering the Other, as, for example, the screening of *The Good Postman* in The House of Cinema in Sofia. In terms of evaluating the effectiveness of such initiatives, it is difficult to single out certain factors that contribute to the challenging of the hegemonic discourse more than others. As Hristosov pointed out, the expected result of such events is not a drastic transformation, since often the people who come to these events are already inclined to challenge the hegemonic processes of othering. Rather, the goal is shifted towards the mobilisation of these people who are already more knowledgeable and sympathetic about the lives of the refugees and ethnic minorities. Thus, the aim here is not to turn the world view of the audience around, but to influence those who are undecided to see the Other in a comfortable space unified by a common activity and to inspire these people, energise them to influence their environment, inspire to change. Generally, the screenings of films that have the potential to challenge the hegemonic othering narrative could contribute from additional engagement activities, such as post-screening discussions. Thus, a further critical engagement with the film could encourage and facilitate intercultural dialogue and negotiation.

From the point of view of the Other, the situation is much more problematic: since an interzone is supposed to be a movement 'from below', or a grassroots

movement, the role of the Other should be equal to that of the other audiences. The refugees who are attending such events should also be given an opportunity to participate in the organisation process, perhaps through discussions after the screenings, or influencing the programming. Another aspect that suggests a serious limitation to the effectiveness of such intezonal initiatives is the strictly urban localisation of such events. Unfortunately, in most cases, such events are limited to the capital, and there is a lack of such initiatives in other cities, as well as in the rural area, while the main areas of problems are still outside Sofia. By this, I mean that the areas where there are most conflicts and less tolerance are located outside Sofia, including Harmanli, a town in Haskovo province, where the struggle with the refugee crisis got most of the media coverage.

Therefore, some areas of future improvement include giving more voice to the refugees, making these events more widely publicised to encourage a more inclusive space, outside of the activists' usual circle. In the vein of the inspirational role of such events, perhaps a more direct link should be established with the activism and volunteering opportunities for the audiences of these films. Furthermore, varied location or festivals-on-the-move would be useful in promoting diversity and challenging the hegemony of mainstream media in the regions where an alternative is much less accessible (smaller cities and rural areas).

While I was conducting my research, The Global Migration Film Festival organised by the online platform Refugee Ocean, took place in December 2017 and December 2018 in Sofia as well as in Harmanli, addressing the specific localities where such discussions are most needed. Furthermore, November 2018 was announced as the Refugee Month in Sofia – a month of events directed at promoting intercultural dialogue that included screenings and discussions, quizzes, culinary courses, book readings, and theatre performances. The Refugee Month included three screenings of migration-related feature and documentary films, such as *Border* (Yoncheva, 2017), *Ketermaya* (Jedrzejak, 2016), and *Jupiter's Moon* (Mundruczó, 2017), followed by discussions moderated by volunteers who work in the refugee camps in Bulgaria. The emergence of such initiatives coupled with the rising audience interest towards Bulgarian national cinema, suggests that in the future, Bulgarian cinema could fulfil its potential as a cinema of intercultural negotiation even more. While there is still a necessity to not only create more spaces of an encounter but also mediate and moderate these encounters in order to establish a



dialogue, there is a reason to believe that in the future, new possibilities of challenging the hegemonic narrative of othering will arise.

## Chapter 5 Historical Representations and the Role of Cinema in Coming to Terms with the Past in Post-1989 Bulgaria

### 5.1. Introduction

The radical change of the post-communist transition has led to a certain fragmentation and polarisation in Bulgaria, resulting in a society divided not only politically, but also economically and culturally (Transition Dialogue Network, 2017). In order to examine the specific aspects of memory contestation, I am looking at the ways that the past is framed in the new Bulgarian cinema about *prehoda* and analysing the role of cinema as a mediator in coming to terms with the past. The chapter discusses the representations of disruptive change and continuity of power; official history and vernacular memory and the interplay between the private and public domains; and the potential of cinema as a facilitator of a dialogue about the past.

#### **Post-1989 history and remembering: radical change and polarisation, discourses of disruption and continuity of power**

Despite the fact that almost thirty years have passed since the events of 1989, the re-evaluation of the past, as well as the multiple reframings of it continue to serve different new political interests and agendas. The present study acknowledges that, despite the radical essence of the transition, the continuity of history can never be fully destroyed. Nevertheless, the dominant discourses surrounding *prehoda* are that of disruption and discontinuity, and the sense of a fragmentation of history has been noted by numerous scholars of the region, including Breuer and Delius (2017), Challand (2009), Spaskovska (2017), and Tomczuk (2016). The temporalisation of space (Tlostanova, 2014) on the spectrum of progress/regress becomes more evident in the context of the discourses of catching up (Habermas, 1990) or lagging in time (Bhabha, 1994), where the post-communist countries were expected to transition from one system to another.

The concept of post-socialism in historical and political refers to the asymmetry of power that influences the way that history is perceived, represented and reconstructed. In particular, it is evident that the concept includes all countries of the former Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, disregarding their differences and

assuming that their experiences have been defined exclusively by the fact that they existed under one regime and then, started transitioning to another, more progressive one. Thus, it can be argued that the processes of *temporal othering* have been applied to Eastern Europe after the fall of the regime. One evidence of this is the unification of the diverse experiences of communism in the region and, therefore, a total elimination of the specific, historical and varied experiences that existed in these countries prior to 1989 and an exclusion of the whole region from the space of 'historical normality' (Buden, 2018).

It is, then, within this 'historical normality' where the transitional discourses operate, designating the role of the norm to the global idea of the West, and, at the same time, encouraging ahistoricism, where the real diversity of the historical experiences of communism does not matter anymore. Furthermore, the future does not matter anymore either, since the 'return to Europe' is understood not as a movement towards the future, but as a 'progression towards a reality that existed in Western Europe'. Simultaneously, post-communist reality is labelled as 'belated' (Buden, 2018).

The existence of the East and the West in two different temporalities is described by Challand as 'heterochronia' which is used to reveal the silent historical, economic and political hierarchies that still exist in Europe (2009). 'Heterochronia' is described as a 'situation in which a given group does not have the capacity to choose the cognitive means to perceive itself, as a consequence of being put in a different time location (as in the case of a society designated "backward")' (Challand, 2009: 401). Several issues emerge from this heterochronic condition, reinforcing the distance between the two societies, in this case – Eastern and Western Europe. At the same time, a lack of historical distance from the recent past (1989) is framed as a reason for not being able to evaluate the past yet. In the previous chapter, I have demonstrated how undesirable national traits can be projected on the Other. In line with these observations, Challand argues that temporal othering may now become even more topical and be re-actualised once again in the context of national identity rebuilding which requires a designation of a new Other (Challand, 2009).

The issue of discourses of belatedness is not only in the denial of a common history but also in the devaluing the historical experiences of communism and encouraging a total amnesia as the best tool of moving on. It is interesting that instead of coming to terms with the past and evaluating it, it is suggested to forget

and move on, as fast as possible. Such a characterisation of the past as invaluable and unequal is not only ahistorical but also apolitical, since it eliminates any possibility of an alternative to the hegemonic ideal of progress. In the Bulgarian case, in the context of a lack of a cut off moment of starting over, the process of coming to terms with the past through forgetting and moving on is exacerbated by the discourse of catching up with the rest of Europe.

The idea of lagging in time should be explored because it might affect how *prehoda* is represented and constructed visually and how the causal links are formed between the past and the present in Bulgaria. Buden argues that such replacement leads to a complete lack of an alternative – it can no longer be imagined. Nevertheless, as Buden argues, ‘a better past is still possible’ (2018) if we continue to imagine alternatives of a future by exploring and re-evaluating the past, which, I argue, is exactly what the case study films are doing.

## 5.2. Exposing Disruptive Change and Continuity of Power

*‘A time when we hastily stood still...’ (Operation SC)*

Interestingly, the discourse of ‘catching up’ is linked to another time-related discourse, and that is the idea of a disruption, meaning that the normal progress towards the Westernised civilisation was disrupted by Soviet power in 1944. Not surprisingly then, this discourse has been effectively adopted in numerous political agendas where the economic and political hardships in post-communist Bulgaria have been blamed on the Soviet legacy. It also seems that the polarised view of the past in Bulgaria is exacerbated by the fact that there is no official consensual narrative describing the legacy of communism (Koleva, 2012).

The discourses of gaps and discontinuities seem to be persistent throughout studies in the region. Furthermore, this is also reflected in the coexistence of the seemingly contradictory discourses of continuity and discontinuity used to describe the legacy of communism in Bulgaria. As Kofti observes in her ethnographic study of the workers of the *Mladost* factory in Sofia, the workers say ‘everything has changed’ and yet, ‘everything is the same’, which indicates that ‘narratives of continuity ran parallel to those of rupture’ (2016: 79). Kofti identifies both narratives as complementary rather than contradictory, as they both act as mechanisms of coming to terms with the rapid changes after 1989. It could be argued that this

paradox is a result of the lack of a meaningful engagement with the past in Bulgaria. While the narrative of change is relatively easy to explain by the changes experienced by the working class people at the factory after its privatisation, the narrative of continuity, mainly alludes to the lack of lustration policies and, therefore, the perceived continuity of power. Thus, the narrative of discontinuity is, at some level, an expression of nostalgia sparked by the way things changed in their experiences as factory workers (e.g. less stability), while the narrative of continuity mainly reflected the sense of 'powerlessness' as a result of corruption and power succession. Interestingly, a similar interweaving of continuity and discontinuity narratives was also reflected in the case study films, as well as in the focus group responses in the current study. In this research, however, instead of 'continuity' and 'discontinuity', I am using the notions of 'continuity of power' versus 'disruption'. The *continuity* of power is used to describe the discourses of lack of political change that emerged in the films and in the discussions, while *disruption* highlights the sudden and traumatic nature of *prehoda*.

### **Cinematic ways of portraying the past: exposing disruption, fragmentation, and polarisation**

This section looks at the specific visual and stylistic ways of establishing the time and location in the case study films, it also looks at the ways that these films represent change. It has been observed that the case study films tend to establish the date and the location at the beginning, yet, the narrative and the chronology that follows is chaotic and nonlinear, contrasting the clarity of the past and the instability of the present.

Since some of the case study films have quite complex nonlinear narratives, the historical period is established directly and precisely through a caption right after the opening credits.



Figure 11 – Opening of *Operation Shmenti Capelli*



Figure 12 – Opening of *Tilt*

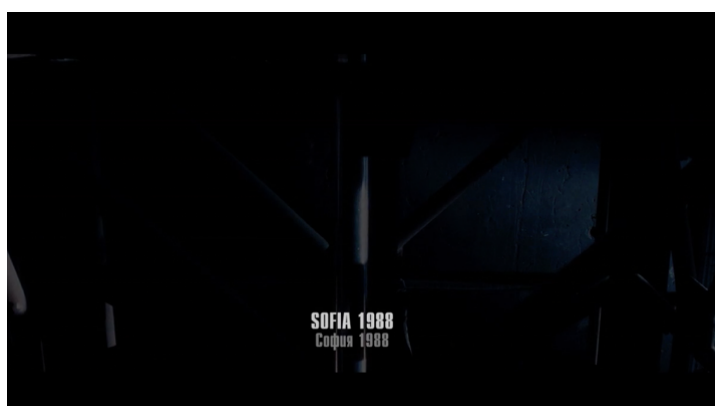


Figure 13 – Opening of *The Petrov File*

The concrete establishment of a particular time can also be seen in *Chameleon*, and *The World*, while the difference is that those films are situated within their timeline by an oral statement rather than a written comment: as a part of a monologue in *Chameleon* (7 November 1989, the date when the main character was suspended from the army due to epilepsy), and as a comment from the narrator in *The World* ('My life started on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1975'). *Zift* may seem more implicit

in establishing the framework, as the historical context is activated with the help of indirect, but very striking, visual and audio symbols, such as the announcement on the radio, and the Soviet propaganda slogans on the walls of the prison.

As can be seen from the screenshots above, the location is also quite firmly established by the caption, situating the film in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. The location is also mentioned in *Zift* (a narrator talking about a famous street and district in Sofia), in *Operation SC* (the first scene is a close up shot of the former Bulgarian Communist Party house), *Tilt* (the point where the gang meets is the famous monument of the Soviet Army in Sofia), and *Chameleon*. Therefore, five out of the six case study films take place in urban settings in the capital, and only one (*The World*) is situated in the small town of Karlovo in a more rural setting.



Figure 14 – Display of slogans in the prison in *Zift*: ‘Those who don’t work don’t eat’

It may seem natural to start a historical film by establishing the place and date, but the fact that this is done in a very straightforward way, through a verbal comment, is significant. One possible explanation for this is the resist the paradoxical reality of life under communism and after the fall of the regime by creating an artificial clear divide between the past and the present. An interesting example of capturing the frustration about the ongoing change and the never-ending transition in Bulgaria is the phrase by the narrator in *Operation SC*, who suddenly breaks the narrative and decides to go back in time in order to explain everything, but succeeds only in making it more misleading: ‘It all began “before” (meaning: before 1989) and continued “now” (in the present)’.

Apart from the dates in the opening credits, there are also several important events mentioned in *Operation SC*, making the representation of the context much more detailed and specific. As opposed to the bold and detached dates given in the opening, the historical events are only mentioned in the context of the personal

emotions and lives affected by them. One good example is the New Year scene in *The Petrov File* showing different families watching the festive speech of Todor Zhivkov on television. The scene reveals the minimalist interior and the miserable conditions in the apartment of Petrov and his wife, Maria, as a contrast to the colourful screen of the television. The bottles of Coca-Cola on the table clearly symbolise the interest in the Western values and the propaganda of consumerism. Yet, the following comments of Petrov and his friend reveal the level of despair about the lack of changes: 'Cheers and may next year be without him' – 'It's more likely for communism to fall in North Korea than in Bulgaria...'

The case study films expose existing anxieties about discontinuity after the changes in Bulgaria, at the same time aiming at re-establishing a more logical timeline of *prehoda* by introducing rigid time frames. Another tool of establishing continuity in the face of change is the use of memorable large-than-life symbolic images, such as sculptures of Lenin, numerous portraits of Soviet leaders, banners with popular slogans, bright red stars and communist monuments along with flags and iconic buildings. The material artefacts of the past are escapist on the one hand, since they create striking and over-the-top mise-en-scene, but, on the other hand, they are also 'grounding elements', acting as reference points or recognisable elements of the everyday life in the past (including, for example, the portraits of the party leaders which were the omnipresent and irreplaceable aspects of the mundane life during the communist rule).

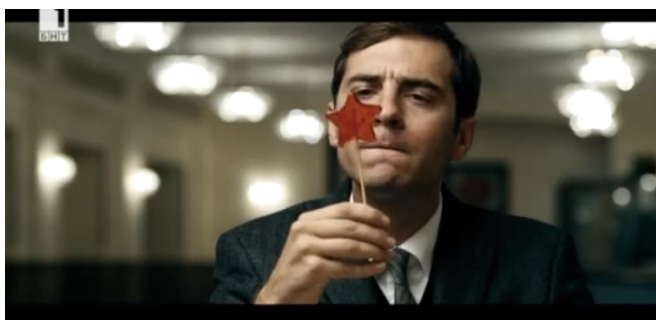


Figure 15 – Visual symbolism in *The Colour of the Chameleon*





*Figure 16 – Theatre and a hanging USSR flag in The Petrov File*

These images contribute to the anxious and oppressive atmosphere in the films, showing how the symbols became so overwhelming and distant from the real life that they lost their meaning in a way and turned into a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1994). The instability and constant decay of the communist system are highlighted by showing the major Soviet symbols collapsing, just as in the following scene with the iconic photo 'The Kiss' (Erich Honecker and Leonid Brezhnev kissing in 1979).



*Figure 17 - 'The Kiss' poster in The Colour of the Chameleon*

Socialist art is also effectively used in the films to draw the attention of the audience to the historical context. Several forms of art and propaganda (understandably tied closely together in the socialist states), such as motivational banners, slogans, and patriotic songs were used more frequently than others. At the same time, this indulgence in the visually recognisable symbols of the epoch could be an example of commodification of history. Not only does this encourage and has the potential to evoke nostalgic emotions – it can also address the audiences abroad through shock and self-exoticism.



Figure 18 – Flag featuring G. Dimitrov in *Operation Shmenti Capelli*



Figure 19 – Slogan 'Peace is Our Specialisation' in *The Colour of the Chameleon*

The constant presence of propaganda and socialist art is evident even in the life of the prisoners in *Zift*, where all daily routines are organised around the radio reports. The radio receiving station ('*radiotochka*') was a very important part of the socialist heritage, reminding the audience about their childhood homes in a quite nostalgic way. A '*radiotochka*' was, and sometimes still is, installed in every home, often in the kitchen, in order to transmit important messages from the state-owned radio, but also to play music from other socialist states. Therefore, the role of these symbols is twofold: it not establishes the context for the audiences who share certain memories about the past, but also provides a common ground with the other countries of the Eastern Bloc. In *Zift*, for instance, the radio plays different songs in Russian reminding the prisoners about the BNR-USSR friendship. Another sign of the Russian influence is a big painting on the hospital wall - *The Morning in a Pine Forest*, one of the most famous Russian paintings by artists Ivan Shishkin and Konstantin Savitsky.



Figure 20 – Image of the radiotochka in *Zift*

An especially interesting way in which the transition and change are represented in the case study films is revealed in the constantly switching portraits of the socialist leaders on the walls. Even in the late 1980s the cult of certain political leaders in the Eastern bloc remained quite strong, and Bulgaria was no exception, with the ongoing cult of the former leader Georgi Dimitrov (Apor, Behrends, Jones, Rees, 2004, 194) and the secretary of state at the time – Todor Zhivkov. A portrait of the current leader in the corridors, and especially above the desk, was a must for any state institution, which is why the presence of a portrait became an issue when the political system collapsed. The importance of those portraits in Soviet times went beyond propaganda, it was also a way of reminding all state officials and their visitors that they are being watched.

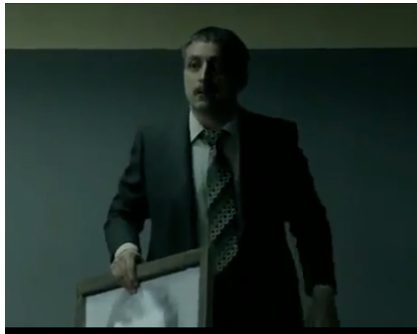
Portraits of various political leaders are also present in *The World* (Brezhnev), *The Petrov File* (Zhivkov), *Chameleon*, and *Operation SC*.



Figure 21 – A portrait in *The Petrov File*

*Tilt* offers a particularly striking example of this in the scene right after the militia raid in the basement: the young gang is taken to the police, where they witness the switching of portraits on the wall, with the scene taking place in November 1989 right when Zhivkov was ousted. Both the teenagers and the police investigator are

clueless about what is happening: 'Who is that?' – 'Some CKar' (slang for a member of the central committee of the Bulgarian Communist party). After just one minute an official is ordered to take the portrait off again and to replace it with someone more 'permanent': 'Just put up a random revolutionary – Botev, Levski, Benkovski<sup>5</sup>'. Ironically, this scene serves both as a representation of the lack of interest and an ironic comment on the outdated national propaganda, based on particular national heroes. The bureaucracy of the police is also criticised in this scene, emphasising the desire of the government and state system to cling to the icons of the past in order to sustain at least some kind of stability.



*Figure 22 – Change of portraits in Tilt*

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<sup>5</sup> Leading figures in the organisation and direction of the Bulgarian anti-Ottoman April Uprising of 1876.

### ***Prehoda* and the continuity of power**

Along with the themes exposing disruption and the subsequent desire to regain continuity, there are also some themes within some of the films that indicate that ‘nothing really changed’. I would argue that these two seemingly contradictory themes can coexist logically, if paradoxically, as they are used to describe different aspects of the transition. To be more specific, if the discourse of discontinuity quite understandably describes the ideological, political and economic changes after 1989, the discourse of continuity reflects on the present more than it does on the past. In other words, the division and polarisation regarding the varied tendencies of evaluating the communist past become more actualised when it is connected to the present. By this, I mean that the trope of ‘nothing really changed’ is used mostly to describe one very specific aspect of the transition – that of the continuity of power, corruption, and lack of lustration policies, especially in the political context.

One of the most widespread tropes of continuity seems to be that of a ‘*podmyana*’ (the literal translation is ‘*replacement*’, but actually this means ‘to substitute one thing for another that is not what it says it is’). Cinema effectively communicates this idea of the endurance of the communist party even after 1989, accentuating the succession and circulation of power, and the deep roots of modern problems in the communist past. The lack of lustration policies and the delay of de-communisation in Bulgaria can, therefore, be seen as the main block to resolving the *prehoda* process. The idea of a never-ending circle of events and an actual replacement of one corrupted government by another is a central focus of many Bulgarian films, voicing the anxiety that many Bulgarians had after 1989. Therefore, harsh criticism of the past serves as a starting point for a critique of the present. The *failed transition* and the lack of actual democratisation processes in contemporary Bulgaria is exposed in *Operation SC*, *Tilt*, *The World*, *The Petrov File*, and *Chameleon*. The delay of post-communist lustration policies in Bulgaria led to overall distrust in the possibility of a constructive change, as the following comment from *Operation SC* suggests:

This is a story that happened on the border of two different epochs and on the limit of human capabilities. This is roughly how our ‘new history’ looked like, on the verge of the new epoch, an epoch when a collision of two old cars was considered a historical event. A time when we hastily stood still... Now the things are very different. Well, maybe not that different...

The sense that nothing had essentially changed is one of the most typical tropes in Bulgarian films about the transition, stressing once again the enormous gap between the expectations and the reality that the people were facing. The lack of effective lustration policies also remains a major source of frustration. This subject was repeatedly tackled in films, such as *Tilt*, especially in the scene after the fall of the regime when the former state security agent and his colleagues are playing cards in a restaurant, casually discussing buying new apartments. It suggests that they are still powerful and feeling confident, regardless of what has happened in 1989.

Other films that expose the unaltered political system include *Chameleon*, where the majority of the communist party activists become executives and ambassadors in the new democratic Bulgaria, *The Petrov File*, in which after the official fall of communism the secret services are replaced by the corrupt government and mafia, Petrov is bullied by the mafia and the new democratic party is manipulated by former communists, and in *The World* where we see a billboard advertising a campaign for a socialist party candidate in the new elections – the head of the police who previously blackmailed Sashko's father. The poster alludes to the continuity/discontinuity, because, ironically, the candidate's slogan is 'For New Bulgarian'.



Figure 23 – Billboard in *The World is big and Salvation Lurks around the Corner*

Similarly, in *The Petrov File*, the lack of change is represented by the fact that Petrov has been manipulated into becoming a leader of the new democratic party, indicating that the role of the leader (and the whole party) was only a decorative one. As the film director Balabanov states:

I tried to place my characters in this intermediate time to tell about the transition ... This time of change. [...] In this sense, there is nothing unique about what has happened in Bulgaria, this is just a brutal change of ideologies in a very short period of time. After all, again, the nomenclature remained the same, only its name changed (Balabanov, 2016).

This sense of hopelessness expressed by Balabanov, and articulated in his film, is also to some extent reflected in the focus group discussions. Most importantly, many of the participants expressed a sense of a predetermination of events, where history is seen as a relative thing, a knowledge that is never available to the subjects of history in its entirety. One participant stated that there are various versions of history, meaning that history is subjective and personal: 'Well, now, history is something that I don't really like. But everyone has something to say about history. History is just a story, I can tell it one way, someone else – in a completely different way' (Participant 3, 40). This comment also shows the ability to consider the grand narrative of history as just one of the possible interpretations of the past.

As the discussion shows, there is no consensus about the events of the past; moreover, there is no possibility for a dialogue: 'There is no agreement on what happened. Bulgarian society is divided and it will continue to be divided...' (Participant 17, 77). Another participant referred to a complete fragmentation of society and, as a result, very uncritical evaluations of the past: 'The system is created in such a way that people would not question these things' (Participant 15, 62). A similar concern was expressed in my interview with Mileva, who pointed out that the polarisation of Bulgarian society is intensified by the different interpretations of the past, as if two competing versions of history co-exist:

As I now begin to notice, the state is divided into two: the first half knows very well what happened then and they teach their children about it. This was our experience in some schools. Only two or three kids could answer our questions, they even knew about the *goryani*<sup>6</sup> movement... The rest of the class are shocked and surprised because they have never heard of it! (Mileva, 2017)

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<sup>6</sup> Anti-communist resistance group formed in Bulgaria in 1944

The varied degrees of knowledge about the recent past among the younger generations is deeply rooted in the abandonment of this topic in the historical handbooks and school lessons. As the Bulgarian historians Baeva and Kabakchieva argue:

The high school curriculum hardly ever gets to the study of socialism because it is orientated toward the preparation of students for the university entrance exam, and this covers only the period until the end of the First World War. Teachers prefer to teach history only until that period, avoiding the danger of finding their interpretations of modern Bulgarian history in conflict with the changing political conjuncture (2014: 76)

Ultimately, this educational gap results in a huge disparity of knowledge among the children who are forced to seek for alternative sources of knowledge, varying from the intergenerational exchange of personal recollections, to representations in the arts and media.

Gardev, the director of the film *Zift*, noted that Bulgaria is not only polarised and divided but also that this division might be very difficult to challenge. When discussing the audience's perception of *Zift*, Gardev suggests that this binary division leads to the fact that humour and absurdism can be perceived as offensive – since it is seen as an attempt to devalue the past or this particular version of the past:

There are these major dividing lines, many extreme opinions about reality, which do not match at all, suggesting incompatibility and intolerance from one public sector to the other, total intolerance (Gardev, 2017).

Another example of disruption and division is the debate around the timeline of *prehoda* and if *prehoda* has actually ended. Obviously, with the events of the transition starting back in 1989, there has potentially been enough time for it to end, however, some participants in different groups were confident that *prehoda* is still in progress. When asked if they think that the transition is over, they noted:

- No... (Participant 16, 79).
- Definitely not! (Participant 17, 77).
- When the changes came, we thought that in ten years things would get better. Some said 10-20, but come on! It's been 27 years now, but we've



come nowhere close, just because our Communist Party was transformed into an economic elite, they have the money and power. *Prehoda* is not over, because there was no lustration in our country, as in other countries of Eastern Europe, the Communists seized all the key places in the economy. Corruption is at a very high level on the top levels of power, and that is the main thing that dominates in Bulgaria – corruption, so ... our transition is far from complete. We have a lot of work to do, judicial reforms, economic change and what not (Participant 16, 79).

- We don't even know what society we live in - it's definitely not democratic. It is supposed to be democratic, but it is a mix... (Participant 17, 77).
- It's *prehoda* still! It just goes on and on (Participant 16, 79).

In another group, the participants also discussed corruption and added that *prehoda* would continue while there are still things to steal (Participant 19, 75), alluding to the rise of corruption in the 1990s. Paradoxically, on the other side of the spectrum were those who were sure that *prehoda* has ended a long time ago, precisely because there is nothing left to steal, because 'everything has already been distributed' (Participant 12, 43).

An interesting perspective was offered by another participant who suggested that *prehoda* is over, but the topic is still subject of manipulation of the current government: '*Prehoda* is over, but they are telling us that it's not':

It's over, yes. It depends what a transition means. So the truth is, the transition is over. But we are being told that the transition is still in progress so that we think that something else needs to be done. All the important things have already been done (Participant 15, 62).

The contrasting comments above indicate the disruption, fragmentation and, at the same time, disempowerment evident in the way the participants reflected upon the recent history, regardless of their age and location. The issue of a lack of agency is best discussed in the context of the discourse of the continuity of power, indicating that nothing really changed.

One of the films that reflect most explicitly on the issue of the continuity of power is *Shmenti Capelli*. The film's opening scene was used in the focus groups as a starting point of the discussion about *prehoda*, and in all groups, this was the scene

that resulted in a complete agreement among all participants who stated that this was exactly how it all happened. The opening scene from *Shmenti Capelli* specifically targets the narrative of disempowerment and helplessness that followed the fall of the regime in Bulgaria.

The opening of the film shows the 'behind-the-scenes' events that were happening during the peaceful 'coup' in November 1989 in Bulgaria. The first shot is a strike of lightning in the darkness of the night which illuminates the House of the Party in Sofia with its columns and its red star on the top shining bright. The overly dramatic effect is intensified by the thunderstorm noise and very disturbing background music, highlighting the unclarity and even the mysticism surrounding the events of November 1989.

The camera then moves towards the windows of the building and proceeds into the hall where the decisions are made about Bulgarian society right after the transition. The room is a big hall with an oval table, and a voice inside the room announces: 'Dear comrades, this evening you will receive a message that is important for our future development, and you have to fully understand and remember it well. We all need to abide by the following rules'. The 'rules' are read aloud by an unnamed man in a suit. Everybody in the room, including a priest, several men in military uniform and other people, possibly, party members, are listening quietly. In the meantime, the camera follows a bold middle-aged man (The First) walking with a stick entering the building. The audience never sees his face, but supposedly the man is the puppet master who issued the 'message' in the first place.

The 'message' continues and generally covers all spheres of life that are meant to be controlled by the government, including the political opposition, the economy, legislation, religion, media, the cultural sphere, education, and healthcare. The direct succession of power is confirmed in the first suggestion about reforming the existing Bulgarian Communist Party and creating a seemingly new party which would still contain the same members and same agenda, while the opposition would intentionally be maintained 'convenient and easily controlled'.

The next part of the message deals further with the idea of the economic division of society, and particularly it encourages creating a society where the workers' rights are not protected and the legislation is as ambiguous as possible: 'The industrial

sector is to be distributed through privatisation to our companies. The population is to be encouraged to enroll in so-called workers' associations, but only for enterprises that are subjected to liquidation. The economy to be divided into spheres of interest that are to be managed by the so-called businessmen imposed by us... Local criminal groups to be created in order to control the economy and the markets'. It is, therefore, suggested that the government is radically corrupt and that it remained corrupt after 1989. The privatisation process is represented essentially as a robbery which left the workers with no rights and no protection. This comment correlates more with the discourses of discontinuity implying some level of nostalgia for some aspects of socialism that were now lost, including effective unions, higher and guaranteed salaries, less unemployment.

This scene conveys overtly the belief that the events of *prehoda* were completely orchestrated by the former party members, and that this manipulation and continuity of power penetrates all levels of social life, from low salaries for the teachers to the monopoly of the media and the lack of any political opposition. The main themes of the 'message' are the omnipresent control of all spheres of life, relying on the passivity of the public and staging almost a theatrical performance simulating a democratic transition. Furthermore, as the film progresses, there are no examples of political engagement or empowerment.

After the scene was screened in the focus groups, the participants agreed that this depiction of the past was extremely accurate. The focus groups indicated that, since the vision of the past is fragmented, subjective and contested, there is also a feeling that it was all directed, orchestrated, and imposed from the outside: 'The right moment has passed' – so, whatever we do today, it can't really change anything about the past, the framing of the past. It is (and we are) part of an orchestrated 'scenario' (Participant 10, 34).

*Prehoda*, therefore, is framed in the public discourse as an example of continuity of a very specific kind – that of power fuelled by corruption and a lack of lustration policies. According to one younger participant who did not experience the transition himself, the film recreated an accurate and specific representation of the past: 'In this scene ... [you see the world you are living in] And I thought about the *Matrix*, because... You know, here everything is programmed' (Participant 3, 40).

Agreeing with the main message of the film, the participants described the events of 1989 and the transition as some kind of a plan or a scenario imposed 'from above', while the ordinary people did not matter and had no agency: 'I think, this will never change. The state security is so deeply incorporated in the society that in reality, it will never disappear' (Participant 2, 28).

Apparently, the view is very pessimistic, and there is no hope that the situation will ever change. In another group, the transition was seen as a substitute of one system with another that looked different on the outside but is still the same in its essence. In other words, there is a causal link between the events in 1989 and the aftermath of it today: *The system has changed, but nothing really changed.*

- Definitely, then, people didn't know how it would turn out. [The government, those in power] were relying on (as it is said in the film) disinformation, pitting people against each other, labelling them as 'communists', it was all about that. And while this was all happening, their whole **plan** was developing successfully (Participant 4, 31).
- In the background, that's right (Participant 1, 25).
- It was a gradual liquidation of the man (Participant 2, 28).

Such strong indications of a liquidation of the human aspects of life and a total elimination of the 'ordinary man', sounds quite extreme, however this comment was not in any way an isolated case. The participants pointed out that they do not know what actually happened behind closed doors at the political level but it was obvious to them that the results can be witnessed at all levels of Bulgarian society. In this discussion the participants are, once again, pointing out the passivity of the people in the process of the transition:

- I have a feeling that it was all a directive from someone somewhere (Participant 19, 75).
- Yes, a directive from above (Participant 20, 78).

Furthermore, some of the participants expressed a concern that their opinions on that matter are not taken seriously. The younger participants were concerned that they had not been witnesses of the situation, therefore their perspective is limited, while the older participants used self-deprecating language: 'our perspective

is distorted because of our age' (Participant 20, 78). Therefore, both younger and older participants felt that their experiences were, for different reasons, devalued.

To sum up, there are discourses of both continuity and disruption present in the case study films and in the discussions about the films. I would suggest that they both are an indicator of the same thing – a sense of **powerlessness and passivity**. Since the events of 1989 and *prehoda* are perceived and represented as an orchestrated and manipulated process, the general public does not consider itself an active participant able to instigate change.

### 5.3. History and Memory: The Vernacular and Official Modes of Remembering and the Gap between the Private and the Public Domains

Even though the participants stated that they did not feel authorised comment on history, they, nevertheless, made some critical observations both about the past and the present. I would argue that this engagement with the past, despite the manifested disengagement with history, was achieved through relating to everyday memories and experiences, rather than discussing the general events of history that were perceived as more distant.

It can be argued that the role of the vernacular recollections of the past have recently gained momentum in the form of grassroots and online initiatives, particularly in Bulgaria. As Vukov notes in his article about the museumising of the communist past in Bulgaria, 'as if following a hidden agreement, all the activities related to "mass cultural work" among working people ceased immediately after 1989' (2008: 321). Vukov suggests that such a shift in attention from official to vernacular memory can be explained by the significant ideological role that history played in socialist times, not only in Bulgaria but throughout the Eastern Bloc. After 1989, the grand historical narratives were replaced with personal, mundane, material, specific, subjective, and, most significantly, varied recollections of the past. Vukov adds that the depersonalised representations of history in the socialist museums were so strongly ideologically charged that they, in fact, became detached from reality, replacing 'the tangible sense of the past by an abstract ideological history' (Vukov, 2008: 332). In the end, this led to a complete dissolution between memory and its representation, creating a memory that is 'unmemorable' – one 'that is stored but does not reach representation' (Vukov, 2008: 331). As of 2018, there is still no official museum of the socialist past and the European revolutions of 1989

in Bulgaria, which might suggest that the memory of 1989 is still in the domain of the unmemorable in the official narrative. At the same time, as the present study shows, there are numerous diverse representations of the past in cinema to some extent restoring the lost link between official history and vernacular memory.

As the findings show, extracts from films encouraged a more open engagement with the past through a group discussion. The varied knowledge that the participants shared about the communist period and the events immediately after 1989 was, to some extent, brought together by the common experience of film-watching. The discussions that followed the screenings provided the participants with a productive environment for sharing and communicating, despite their differences.

I argue that the rise in popularity of the vernacular modes of remembering can be traced back to the discrepancies between the private and public spheres that existed during the Soviet dominance in the region. As several studies in the field indicate, the evident discrepancy between the private and the public in post-communist states is rooted in the specificity of the social order under the regime (Brandtstädter, 2007; Oswald & Voronkov, 2004; Huxtable, 2017). While the totalitarian state had control over most areas of social communication, the private sphere was viewed as dangerous and, therefore, mistrusted by the state.

To some extent, the ideal of modernisation within Soviet ideology was built on the idea that the private sphere was shrinking to give way to the public, leading to a society where 'the private was conceptually separated from the public both morally and spatially' (Brandtstädter, 2007: 138). Such a confrontation between private and public inevitably resulted in an ideological separation of the two domains. As far as the public was concerned, the private sphere ideally was not only disconnected from the public but was also apolitical. The lack of any mediation between the two domains only reinforced the division. It is not surprising that, since the fall of communism, in many countries the dialogue between the two spheres is still rare and problematic.

Huxtable suggests analysing collective memory as 'the result of a dialogue between public, vernacular memory discourses' (2017: 311). Revisiting history through informal and vernacular memories, thus, turns out to be the only way to reclaim history in a totalitarian state. The diversity of interpretations of history is itself a struggle against the hegemony of a linear and straightforward ideology, or, indeed,

a countermemory. The lack of an official memory culture is also explored in numerous Bulgarian online resources, that are functioning as museums of the communist past, such as Pamet (Memory), Dese (State Security) and Agenti (Agents). For instance, the Memory project describes its goals concerning collective memory thus:

The few and inconsistent legislative and citizen initiatives aimed at overcoming the communist legacy in Bulgaria have proved insufficient. They were unable to build a culture of memory, and properly commemorate the thousands of victims of communism, who paid with their lives and thousands of others who have suffered physical and psychological repression because of their beliefs, views, faith, and love of freedom (Pamet).

A certain discrepancy between official and vernacular modes of remembering communism is not unique to Bulgaria and can be witnessed in most of the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Throughout the region, the fear of a collective amnesia exacerbated by the constantly emerging polarised interpretations of the past results in a certain need to produce more and more diverse ways to, in Radstone's terms, mediate and articulate the past (2005). These unofficial narratives have been discussed in multiple academic studies, including Morariu's account of the unofficial nostalgic discourses in Romania (2012), Szostak and Mihelj's study of the post-communist memory in Poland mediated by popular television series (2017), Turai's insight into the tensions between the 'hot' and 'cold' memory of the socialist past in Hungary (2009), and the analysis of the emergence of the noninstitutionalised individual memories of the Yugoslav past by Spaskovska (2017), to name a few.

### **The negotiation between the private and public in *Zift*, *Viktoria*, *The Petrov File*, and *Tilt***

The present study reveals a certain level of estrangement from the official historical narrative and, consequently, a denial of any level of politicisation of the discussions about the communist past and *prehoda*. In line with the previous discussion about the division between the official and the vernacular, I would identify the following modes of representation of the past:

1) Highly symbolic and metaphorical (*Zift*, *Chameleon*) – main focus is on History and the more public experiences of the grand historical narrative;

2) Largely private, personal, material, mundane, *bitov* (*The World, Tilt, The Petrov File, Shmenti Capelli*) – dealing with the private memory, where History is used as a distant background;

3) A combination of both – highly metaphorical but told through a deeply personalised intimate experience of birth and mother-daughter relationship (*Viktoria*)

It is important to add here that this classification is illustrative, because evidently, all films engage at some level with the private stories of the protagonists, while the historical context works as a background for the unfolding of the plot. Nevertheless, some films are more preoccupied with history as a global shift of ideologies, while others are more concerned with the private localised memories. For example, while all of the case study films use archive footage, or stylised images resembling archives, and other indicators of historicity at some point, their approach to history is different. *Zift* and *Chameleon* look at history as an ideological dominant, while *Viktoria* offers a more introspective interpretation of history through the personal life story of a woman and her daughter, thus deconstructing the idea of a grand historical metanarrative and offering an alternative perspective through introspection.

### ***Zift***

*Zift* starts in 1944 and develops further in the 1960s. It includes a number of allusions, but generally, it reflects on the small role that an individual is allowed to play in the development of history. In fact, it uses a personal story of a character as a background for the historical changes happening in Bulgaria at the time. The climax of the film demonstrates the alienation of the protagonist from the grand narrative of history where he not only feels powerless and helpless but is also insignificant and lost, both physically and metaphorically.

In *Zift* the linearity of time itself becomes a target for deconstruction – the constant shifts between the past and the present come to their apogee in the scene when Moth is poisoned and embarks on a long journey through a nighttime Sofia in a disturbed state and constantly hallucinating, although the reality of what is happening is never questioned and the hallucinations are instantly normalised. Indeed, his walk around the city works as a contrast to the Soviet totalitarian order – the contrast becomes more and more evident when we see the oppressive



architecture and the carefully calculated empty spaces that obey the rules of totalitarian logic only. On the contrary, Moth is the alien element in this rationalised setting – his disturbed state of mind subverts the established stability of the Soviet city. At the climax of the film the deeper meaning of its title and some of the metaphors are revealed:

Death and the guts of the people's government were under my feet when suddenly the centre of the capital appeared in front of me. I said to myself: 'It came true'. From the roof of the world, the red star shines in the sky like an emerald meteor. The words from the radiotochka in the prison cell were true – the light has won the battle against the darkness. Suddenly I realised that I don't throw a shade. Am I dead? Am I on the other side? Am I in front of the doors to paradise? I feel elated, class conscious. The Mausoleum... I fall down on the yellow pavement, and the cracks are filled with black zift. The words of others help me to grasp the moment. 'Mummy' is an Arabian word and it means black resin – zift. The mummy of the leader has leaked onto the piazza so that I could taste it as a sacrament, so that I could accept it as a grace of God, share it as a dream. The Mummy – the corps with imperishable power.



*Figure 24 – The climax scene in Zift, in front of the House of the Party in Sofia*



*Figure 25 – The climax scene in Zift, the protagonist falls on the pavement*



Figure 26 – Left to right: *The House of Party; the removal of the star; the star today in the Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia*

Here the protagonist is referring to the red star atop of the the so-called House of the Party in Sofia. This iconic building has quite symbolic connotations because the red star was defiantly removed after the fall of communism to demonstrate the alleged succession of power. Quite clearly, there is a familiarisation of what seems to be the most powerful symbol of the socialist times. At the same time, the rational nature of the totalitarian architecture is being challenged by the narrative of a hallucinatory trip, and the references to religion and spirituality in this scene. Further, Moth is questioning the rationale behind cherishing the body in the mausoleum, the cult of a dead body and comparing it to the body of Christ. Thus, this scene reveals the historical gaps or logical inconsistencies in the fabric of history – the rationality of the regime is challenged, and the unlikely link between Soviet ideology and religion establishes the comparison of it with a cult.

*Zift* may seem, to some extent, ahistorical, in the sense that it is highly stylised and true to its noir genre conventions. At the same time, it is radically engaged with history as a grand narrative and *prehoda* as a change of ideologemes. As the director of *Zift*, Javor Gardev, suggests in my interview, his film does not meet the expectations of being a 'mode of archive', because it offers a highly metaphorical reading of the past: '*Zift* is a spontaneous archaisation that does not correspond directly and accurately to an exact epoch. It's just a stylised image that metaphorically represents that era to some extent' (Gardev, 2017).

He also adds that his film aims to 'to rethink communist ideology in a new theoretical way, to somehow look at it and analyse its signs system, and what is the principle of the signs in this society, how does the ideology on the level of the object work' (Gardev, 2017). This comment reveals that the way that history is represented in *Zift* is quite ambitious, in that, it creates a sense of the whole epoch, while also

not quoting any specific periods in history. It can be argued that, instead of an ahistorical depiction, this film is an example of *extreme historicisation*, where history itself is the object of reflection. It is a deeply historical film, even though in its mundane correlations with history it is not tied to a certain materiality. Furthermore, it can be argued that the characters in the film and their private experiences are of a secondary significance.

### ***Viktoria***

At the other end of the spectrum is *Viktoria*, a film that is radically different in its treatment of historicity as a deeply personal introspected experience. This film stands out in several respects. Firstly, this is the only film from the case study sample that was directed by a woman; secondly, it is also the one that is focused solely on female characters; thirdly, this film offers a unique blend of themes where the abstract and metaphorical depiction of history is intertwined with the intimate, personal and physical experiences and relationships between mothers and daughters.

The film engages in a very physical depiction of the female body and the processes of pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding. At the same time, it is also centred on the topic of the mother-daughter bond, and the impact of the totalitarian regime that, to some extent, replaces the traditional family. For example, when Boryana's husband asks how they would leave their mother, Dima, alone, if they were to escape the country, the wife responds, 'She is not a mother, she is a party member'. It is likely that her lack of maternal instincts and desire to become a mother is linked in the narrative with the fact that her own mother was so distant.

The film offers a combination of a realist historicity and surrealist fiction. The archive footage is used alongside some very absurdist images, and the political aspects are constantly interfering with the private. For example, the scenes at the apartment where Boryana lives with Ivan and Dima are very realistic, featuring the furniture in very poor condition, the lack of space and comfort, while the world outside is equally grim and lifeless. On the other hand, the scenes illustrating Boryana's pregnancy and her relationship with her daughter are highly metaphorical and abstract.



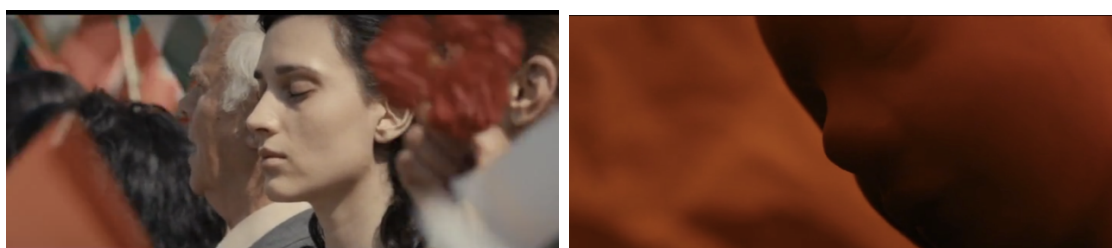
*Figure 27 – Ivan leaving for work on a bus, view from Boryana's window, Viktoria*

The constant intersection between the internal and the external, the public and the private is striking in *Viktoria*. The presence of the Party is noticeable even in the scenes before Viktoria is born, as for example, in the scene in the midwife's cabinet, where Boryana is observed not only by her midwife and her husband but also by Todor Zhivkov, the portrait on the wall.



*Figure 28 – Boryana confirms her pregnancy at a doctor's appointment, Viktoria*

An interesting example of a literal intersection between the outside world and the inside of a woman's body is the scene where pregnant Boryana attends a rally on Labour Day. Again, archive footage is used to show Todor Zhivkov greeting the public from his balcony during the parade, while the people are cheering, waving flags and red carnations. Boryana is standing in the crowd with her eyes closed, trying to distance herself from the surroundings, but simultaneously, the camera shows the unborn baby also listening to the distant sounds of the Bulgarian hymn.



*Figure 29 – Pregnant Boryana and the baby listen to the Bulgarian hymn during the Labour Day rally, Viktoria*

Thereafter, there is another visceral scene in the bathroom, where Boryana is in a bathtub bleeding. It looks like a miscarriage, but three months later she is still pregnant and has a healthy pregnancy despite all her efforts to provoke an abortion or harm the baby. For example, she continues smoking a lot and takes hot baths. Further, the film includes a number of hallucination scenes where Boryana's breasts are bursting with milk, while in reality, she cannot feed her baby, proving once again that the physical and the intimate go hand in hand with the public and the political in the film.

After the child is born, the Party metaphorically and literally takes over and controls everything, from choosing the baby's name – Viktoria, to celebrate the Party's victory in the socialist revolution – to choosing where the young family lives (providing them with a new apartment) and works – offering a job for them both. Thus, the film shows a clear and direct intersection between the deeply personal (a birth of a child, a mother-daughter bond, raising of a child) and the overly generalised politically charged official sphere (the relationship between the baby and Todor Zhivkov, his interference with their personal lives). Zhivkov becomes so interconnected to their personal lives that it is impossible to remove him. This is a metaphor of the impact that the political had on the everyday lives, while it also shows that in this particular extreme example, the official could not be avoided. Even if the people wanted to avoid the public sphere, it followed them and had a significant impact on their relationships and family dynamic.

The strong link between the control over the female body and the metaphor of the Party as Mother becomes even more apparent when Viktoria is born without a belly-button. Not having any scientific explanations, but also obviously not being able to refer to anything as a 'miracle', Todor Zhivkov interprets this in his own political terms:

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of September, the day of our victory we are closer than ever to the bright socialist future. This wonderful baby – Viktoria – fuels our hope for a brighter future. For a new kind of man, stronger, harmonious, detached from the past while in touch with the future... When pregnant women will be working for the wellbeing of the society while their embryos grow and turn into babies somewhere else. Now that it became clear that we no longer need umbilical cords.

Todor Zhivkov then pronounces that not only will Viktoria's family receive a new car, but also 'new airy, socialist apartment, soon to be completed'. The gift is, apparently, from 'our Mother, the party'. The fact that Zhivkov announces that the female body is no longer required to grow a child means that the said body is now assigned only one possible function – to serve the Party. Thus, the intrusion of the political into the physical and intimate domains symbolises a total violation of the personal space.

Nine years later, on Viktoria's birthday, it becomes apparent that the child has become an almost god-like creature favoured by the party and Zhivkov personally – she has no connection with her parents, instead, she talks on the direct phone line with Zhivkov every day and Zhivkov's personal driver takes her to school every morning. It is obvious that since Boryana has to give up her dream of leaving Bulgaria and since the baby was unwanted by her, she is distant from her child. The lack of the umbilical cord symbolises the transfer of the mother-daughter bond to the party, and the body of the child essentially becomes state property at the very start of the film. However, this distance is also intensified by the external factors, namely the unique relationship that her daughter has with Zhivkov. For example, Boryana watches the ceremony of a pioneer initiation on television, and generally she remains a distant observer of the absurdity of the unfolding events. All these years Boryana has also never talked to her own mother, and Viktoria has never met her since she was a baby.

As Viktoria grows up and learns that she is not like the other kids, mainly through realising that everybody else has a belly-button, she seeks more attention and support from Zhivkov. In one scene, the umbilical cord becomes the phone cord that links her to the secret phone line to Zhivkov directly.



*Figure 30 – The phone cord as an umbilical cord linking Viktoria to Zhivkov, Viktoria*

Everything changes drastically in November 1989 after the collapse of communism in Bulgaria. Stressed and scared of what she has seen on television, Viktoria cannot reach Zhivkov on the private phone line. She goes to school where she climbs a high tree and falls injuring her head. This is the moment when Boryana first wants to bond with her daughter, Zhivkov is finally absent and communism has collapsed. Viktoria dreams of being in a pool with her mother, and mother and daughter are finally reconnected, even if only in a dream.

Later, after to the pro-democratic rally in Sofia in 1990, Viktoria gets a call from Zhivkov, but she cuts the cord without picking the phone up. She has a fever and is very sick, while her mother is absent at the rally. When Boryana comes back, her ex-husband says: 'Does the word Mother mean anything to you? Motherly instinct. That's why she has no belly button, not because of the pile of nasty things you did to get rid of her'. This scene could be considered as the second birth of Viktoria, when she is finally separated from the Mother Party but it also seems too late for her to reconnect with her biological mother.

Fast forward four years, 1994, and Viktoria (already a teenager) reconnects with her grandmother in an attempt to understand her own mother better. They spend a lot of time together, talking about Boryana, while Dima proclaims that 'It's easier to love your grandchildren'. The second climax of the film, after the fall of communism, is the death of the grandmother Dima. The scene when Viktoria and Boryana together wash Dima's body is yet another example of the deeply intimate, physical scenes in the film. After the grandmother dies, as does the old world, Viktoria finally

goes on a vacation to Venice and sends her mother a postcard with the words 'Venice is only 1254 km away', possibly hinting at the distance between them. The cathartic resolution of the film is in finally acknowledging the lack of love that was fuelling the family dynamic, and perhaps, coming to terms with it. In a way, the dying of the grandmother finally brings the mother and daughter back together, also alluding to the possibility of a reconciliation and coming to terms with the communist past in Bulgaria.

Blurring the line between historicity and fiction, the other case study films offer quite strong division between history and personal character development, while *Viktorija* is the only film that shows the link so directly and strongly that it is not possible to tell if there even is a line between history and memory. Similar to *Tilt*, this is a coming of age story where the teenager needs to grow up and find their feet in a changing world. While in *Tilt* this leads to the protagonist returning to Bulgaria, vengeance, and being imprisoned, in *Viktorija*, it brings a reconciliation with the mother through the generations, namely through the love of the grandmother and the attempts to understand each other. *Viktorija* is a feminist film that challenges the patriarchal structure of the grand historical narrative. In comparison to the other case study films, *Viktorija* is also empowering, because in the end, it proclaims the victory of the mother-daughter bond over the devastating influence of the totalitarian regime. The private in the film, therefore, is liberated, as the protagonists are almost literally offered another chance to be (re)born after the fall of communism. Thus, in comparison to the other case study films, *Viktorija* offers a more assertive and hopeful view of *prehoda* overall – even if accompanied by personal tragedies, *prehoda* is finite and some type of a closure is possible.

*Viktorija* offers an interesting and radically different perspective that puts the female protagonists at the centre of the narrative, instead of treating the characters as objects of historicity. The physical presence of the historical context in the form of the character of Zhivkov and the metaphorical omnipresence of the 'Mother Party' creates a unique climate, where the private and public interact constantly. Nevertheless, since the mode of representation is always deeply introspective, tied to the physical functions of the female body and the extremely intimate experiences of these women, it becomes clear that the private dominates the public, despite all of the attempts of the latter to intervene and control the personal lives of the characters. Therefore, the film manages to challenge the perception of the



dominance of history over memory, the public over the private, and through the strong link between the two opposites, it effectively blurs the boundaries of genre.

### ***The Petrov File and Tilt***

The films *The Petrov File* and *Tilt* create a certain realistic depiction of the historical events that are used as a backdrop for the development of the characters' stories. These films offer some middle ground and provide interesting examples of the interactions between the public and the private manifested through more specific, material, and mundane representations of history.

The importance of memory as a vernacular way to engage with history is emphasised in *The Petrov File* by the idea of a 'stolen life and death' being eventually reclaimed in the form of memoirs. As the film director states, Petrov's suicide is a result of feelings of helplessness in the face of the system:

This is the tragedy of the character: he can't change his fate, and this is actually the basis of the film. That is, he understands that despite all his actions and his involvement, he actually does not change anything. The only way to change something for him is to escape through his own death. If you want to leave the system, the only way, at least in the movie, is by paying with your life (Balabanov, 2016).

However, I would argue that even death does not provide an escape from the system. Even while reading eulogies at funerals, Petrov is still controlled by the communist ideology, which is evident from his speeches that are focused on the civic lives of the deceased and stressing their role as loyal Communist Party members. Petrov's life and suicide is a strong metaphor for the state's intrusion into personal lives to the extent that not even one's death belongs to one, but is appropriated and used to support and strengthen the ruling ideology.

In *Tilt* the private and public are intertwined rather than completely separated. Their influence on each other is undeniable and the plot highlights the omnipresence of the state and its detrimental effect on private affairs. The protagonists of the film are a couple of teenagers who fall in love, while it turns out that the women's father is a high-ranking official who disapproves and eventually destroys their relationship. Interestingly, despite the fact that the film reflects clearly on the mutual influence of

the political and the personal under the regime, the film director, Chouchkov, strongly denies that the film is political:

I mean, it is not a political film about *prehoda*, it is not focused on what happened and what the politicians said and who is to blame... It is not about that in this sense. It is about young people whose lives depend on their choices, because they are just starting their lives as adults, they are confused, because their coming of age is during this period of transition. I tried to show the feeling of confusion when a teenager makes a lot of mistakes. In this sense, yes, the film is about *prehoda*, but it is not about *prehoda* as a political phenomenon (Chouchkov, 2017).

This comment corresponds to the above mentioned division between the public and private that started under the regime and had its effects on the society even post-1989. It is suggested that politics is something unclear, dirty, connected to the discourses of blame and guilt, and, probably, violence. It can be argued that the coming of age trope provides a more accepting view of *prehoda* as a whole, representing Bulgarian society as only a teenager who makes mistakes.

Interestingly, a similar comment was made by Mina Mileva who suggested that while in Bulgaria there is a lack of any official narrative regarding history, there are many grassroots initiatives and cultural representations that not only result in useful debates, but also offer a more humanistic perspective on *prehoda*, allowing for more inclusivity, solidarity, and acceptance rather than blame and further fragmentation. In particular, talking about the lack of lustration policies in Bulgaria and the delayed revelation of the state security archives, Mileva notes:

This [archive opening] is crucial. Not so that these people would be stigmatised, but rather so that there would be awareness. [...] Even though the whole principle of lustration is to prevent the former agents from working in the public sphere, this is not the case in Bulgaria, it's utter chaos here. On the other hand, maybe it is more human this way. This could help more with the reconciliation. Maybe this is our way (Mileva, 2017).

Acknowledging the lack of transparency and awareness about the past in Bulgaria, Mileva suggests that there is a hope for some reconciliation if the process of coming to terms with the past is conducted through the unofficial vernacular

channels. I would argue that the process of a meaningful engagement with the past can and should be diverse in order to be inclusive. In other words, the potential and power of uncertainty and informality should not be underestimated.

### **The negotiation between vernacular memory and official historical narratives**

In the focus groups, some participants pointed out the lack of personal power, but an ability to connect to history through personal anecdotes and stories, reclaiming history through the private domain. In focus group 1, Participant 2 points out that she is not authorised to know what really happened, because she was only one-year-old then. At the same time, she says that she has her own view on the past, because her grandfather was a first-hand witness of the events. Discussing the opening scene of *Operation SC*, she notes:

- So that's a very striking scene. I don't know if this is exactly how it all happened, but that's it... The cause and effect link to what's happening right now. Whether someone really decided to divide the state like this during the transition - I don't know. In fact, in 1989 I was 1 year old, so I can't say for sure. I have a slightly different view on the regime that fell in 1989. Because my grandfather was one of ... how to say ... (Participant 2, 28)
- One of those... From the movie? At the table? (Participant 3, 40)
- Yes, from those at the table ... And his opinion is different, of course... But that's the reason I see things a whole lot different too. I mean, lots of people became rich then – that's a fact. Many people have been betrayed and suffered because of the state – that's also a fact. But my opinion is that not everyone was like that, not everybody was stealing. My grandfather was honest to his last breath, he did not take state money, and in his words he was not particularly involved in such ... stories. But yes, this is the fact that in the last 20 years we have been waiting for *prehoda* to end, and it never really did (Participant 2, 28).

Thus, through the film, she relates both to the past (her family history predetermines her view on the past) and the present (the events of 1989 are the cause of some events in the present). Talking about the objective and subjective relation to the past, she points out that her knowledge is partial and fragmented, but also affected by her personal family history and therefore, emotional, or

communicative, in Assmann's terms (2008). Objectively, she admits that what she sees on screen is true ('fact'). Subjectively, she says that it is more nuanced than that, and not all regime-related people were dishonest.

Participant 3, however, feels more authorised, not only because he has a first-hand experience, but also because of his higher status, having had access to more varied sets of information. Still, he uses the same instruments to prove his point, namely personal accounts, anecdotes:

I've seen a lot of things happening, how political decisions are taken over coffee or in pubs and stuff like that. So, if not 100%, 90% of what we saw in the film is the scenario we live in right now, and I don't think this is going to change. I have heard many times that state security is so deeply embedded in our society that it will never really go away (Participant 3, 40).

Thus, it could be argued that there is an issue with the 'gatekeeping of history': to be able to make assumptions about the 'objective' history, you either have to belong to the upper class or have a very clear first-hand experience. This points out again the feeling of alienation from the historical events and the lack of agency in history. Despite that, all participants were able to express their views, but they felt more comfortable doing this through personal stories, family recollections and anecdotes. It could also be said that they were frequently referring to the specific scenes from the film that we were discussing, thus, I argue that through cinema they were enabled to establish the connection between their private memories and the grand narrative of history.

The findings of this chapter show that there is a differentiation between the private memories as a justified, intimate, subjective recollection of the past and the official historical narrative existing in the public domain. I argue that this can be partially explained by the ideologisation of history in the past, where grand historical narratives were always objects of political manipulation. The mistrust in the official historical narratives, then, results in a lack of engagement with it, and a sense of helplessness and passivity. The engagement with the past through private memories and the mechanisms of postmemory<sup>7</sup> is, nevertheless, present with

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<sup>7</sup> Postmemory is a concept proposed by Hirsch to describe the intergenerational exchange where the 'generation after' is enabled to remember the events lived by the 'generation

nostalgia being one of its forms (Hirsch, 2012). I also argue that cinema provides a necessary distance between the past and the present, allowing the viewers to make more open judgements about history in the safety of the mediated representations on screen.

It can be argued that the study of memory mediated and articulated in *Viktorija* provides an insight into the dialogue between the everyday lived experiences and the official historical narratives. The film also gives an opportunity to examine the impact of the power relations through the negotiations between the private and the public. Such films as *Viktorija* are effectively blending the private experiences with the grand historical narrative, inviting the public domain and the historical figures, like the party leader Zhivkov, into the private lives of the characters. Through this blending, the viewers can relate their own experiences mediated through cinema, postmemory or any other means and create a meaningful engagement with the past. Films like *Zift* expose the absurdity and surreality of the dominance of the grand narrative of history over the private experiences of the characters. At the same time, several other case study films offer an interesting perspective on the more mundane and material aspects of dealing with the past, suggesting that memory is sometimes used as a form of a vernacular empowerment and re-engagement with history, bridging the public and private divide.

#### 5.4. Making sense of the past: the role of cinema in mediating memories

The main goal of this section is to discuss the role of cinema as a memory mediator, by looking at the varied functions that cinema has in coming to terms with the problematic transition. As the findings indicate, cinema is not merely a vehicle of historical representations, but rather an active medium with the potential to trigger new negotiations and establish meaningful connections with the past through merging personal and collective experiences.

The role of cinema, thus, goes beyond being just a vehicle of memories, it is also establishing an intergenerational exchange of memory, bridging the gap between the private and public spheres. Talking about the crucial ideological role that the media played in communist times, Mihelj argues that ‘the mass media

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before’ through their transmitted experiences. Memory work can be described as a processing of history by the individual through their experiences.

played a central role in establishing a link between the public goals of the communist project and the private lives of citizens' (2017: 245). The ability to relate to the public master narratives through mediated personal memories creates a potential for a critical engagement with the present by overcoming the gap between the personal and the political that became prominent in Soviet times:

Arguably, the vast majority of former socialist state citizens – all those not actively involved with the regime as either supporters or victims – can extricate themselves from the burden of the past by emphasising their largely 'privatised' existence. In contrast, memories of state socialist media force individuals to address their own involvement with the now discredited social and political system from within the realm of their own personal and domestic lives (Mihelj, 2017: 245).

In a similar vein, Mitrou uses the concept of *recuperative memory* to emphasise the reconstructive potential of mediated memory as an intergenerational bridge, 'providing a platform for the intergenerational transmission of memory and knowledge for those who did not live under the communist regime, filling in this way the intergenerational gap, despite the lack of political class engagement' (2016: 768). Thus, it is argued that media and cinema combine a diverse range of functions, from postmemory (Hirsch, 2012), memory work, to negotiation and political enabling.

As Todorova suggests, the experiences of dealing with the communist past and relating to it may vary significantly, not only from one locality to another, but also from one individual perception to another. This is why the idea of the negotiation of the past once again proves to be more suitable for the present research, as it reflects the dynamic nature of such memories and suggests that, even though they are still individual, they are being reshaped and re-evaluated in a dialogue mediated by cinema, or in other words, the 'periodic revisiting of subjects and objects of memory' is acknowledged (Todorova, 2014).

Another aspect that is also important in studying the potential of cultural memory in triggering the process of engaging with the past in a meaningful way, is avoiding generalisations about the healing power of a certain articulation of memory, for instance, cinema. Radstone suggests the concept 'therapeutic historiographies' to highlight the importance of the link between the official and vernacular articulations

of memory mediated 'through socially-constituted institutions', thus acknowledging the importance of studying the specific modes of memory articulation and mediation (2005: 142). It can be argued that the link between the seemingly contradictory binaries of the public and private is established through the personalisation of history, or evaluating the official historical master narrative through the lens of private experiences, a lens so often used in various cinematic genres (see Evans, 2013).

It is crucial to note, therefore, that in this research, coming to terms with the past is seen as a fragmented, contested, and dynamic process affected by the multiple interactions between the public and private sphere, and mediated through various social institutions. The past can be actualised and reframed ideologically to serve a certain purpose, such as recent political parties or movements, and thus, there is not one historically accurate representation of the past, but rather multiple subjective and nuanced modes of memory mediation and articulation.

As the analysis of the themes of continuity and disruption in the discussions about *prehoda* demonstrates, the fragmentation of the past can lead to a sense of helplessness and loss of a sense of agency in history. The question that I am posing in this section is the extent to what cinema can enable and emancipate more agency through restoring the coherence and reclaiming the importance of personal memory work. The following analysis will provide answers to this question.

The trend to see art and, more specifically, cinema as a way to build a dialogue and provide various alternative interpretations of the recent historical events was acknowledged by the film directors interviewed. The variety of possible readings of the past provides an opportunity for a more democratic way of engaging with the past by offering multiple contested views on the past and its legacy. Therefore, the need, and challenge, to come to terms with the past and sustain a dialogue in the context of corrupt government and a monopoly in the media is met with the resolution to criticise the media, show its importance, and, finally, propose film as a more independent and critical alternative. All directors agreed that establishing a connection, a dialogue, a debate and even sense of community is one of the primary roles of cinema in mediating history, particularly in Bulgaria where the official interpretations of the past are fragmented and limited. For example, Mina Mileva says: 'There should be a dialogue, at least that's the purpose... The purpose of

everything we do, our platform, Sofia platform, and the dossier committee' (Mileva, 2017).

Some film directors also state that cinema is an individual way of relating to the past through the director's personal experience which correlates with observations made in the previous section about the negotiation between the private and public facilitated and mediated by cinema. For instance, Balabanov states that his and other films about *prehoda* are all attempts to tell history in different ways, tinged by the director's personal experiences (Balabanov, 2016). Hristov notes that whatever the topic of the film, the story is always told 'about ourselves and through ourselves' (Hristov, 2017).

Another function pointed out by the film directors is that of archiving the past, cinema is seen as a document of the times, or as a type of memory work: 'If the movie is done well, it will become a document of its time for decades to come. That's why *Tilt* is so important – it is a document about that time' (Chouchkov, 2017). Gardev, however, states that the role of cinema goes beyond documenting the past and inducing a dialogue and debates in the society. In the interview, he says that cinema, and art in general, triggers the process of relating to the past, be it voluntarily or by accident, as a byproduct of artistic expression:

Not only cinema but arts, in general, help overcome trauma. Willingly or unintentionally, when you deal with this topic, it becomes an attempt to explain what it was like to live then, to cope with it somehow. So, to some extent, yes, my film is an overview of the period that tries to reflect on it and represent it with some understanding (Gardev, 2017).

Mileva is convinced that cinema can not only reflect on the past but also help bridge the gap between the polarised views about the past. Cinema, then, is seen as a dynamic art form that is most capable of addressing the difficulties of *prehoda* in all its nuanced essence: 'Only cinema can help change this [the polarisation regarding the past]! I don't know what else has the potential to do this. Perhaps, some other form of art that is as dynamic as cinema' (Mileva, 2017). Mileva also pointed out the necessity of communicating about the past, as this is the only way to fight the lack of continuity. In her view, the sense of continuity is constantly disrupted by the government, and, therefore, fragmentation is encouraged. *Prehoda*, thus, remains ignored in the official narratives on different levels, not only



culturally, but also quite literally, physically: 'There is no way to build anything new if we don't talk about the past... What we did with the transition was that we actually ignored it. On every level - culturally and even physically, as if *prehoda* almost did not happen'.

The disruptive nature of *prehoda* and the traumatic effect it has on Bulgarian society today was pointed out in some of the interviews with the film directors. Interestingly, the discussions of the transition as a traumatic event were framed within a very specific 'medical' discourse, where the legacy of the past was represented as an illness or a trauma, while the present was shaped by the lack of desire to deal with the illness. The films in this scenario were seen as diagnostic tool: 'The surface is open and a huge boil erupts underneath, unfortunately. If anyone cares to deal with it... But it will erupt anyway, there is no other way' (Mileva, 2017). Stephan Komandarev in an interview about his latest film *Posoki* similarly highlights the diagnostic role of cinema:

When I was a student at a medical school, I had an incredible professor in the diagnostics of internal diseases, an 'old-school' doctor, from another generation. He always said that 80% of the successful treatment is in the correct diagnosis. With this movie we try to make a diagnosis. And, then, maybe the treatment will work too... (Komandarev, 2018)

Cinema as a diagnostic tool, therefore, does not provide a quick resolution of a problem, nor does it necessarily take on a specific therapeutic function. Instead, it offers a variety of representations of the past, each potentially beneficial for a certain group of people. Hristov offers a more radical view and indicates that with the help of discussions and dialogues, cinema restores some sense of community and thus, can possibly undertake a therapeutic role. Using the same medical discourse, Hristov notes:

I firmly believe that not only cinema, but art in general has this function of healing collective trauma. The very fact that there are discussions on this subject (and there are many talks about *prehoda*) is crucial. It is important to have such conversations. And that's how we help each other, and I think cinema can help too. Of course, cinema is not an ER/ambulance, but when such frank conversations happen, people are helping each other. Or, at least, you will help yourself (Hristov, 2017).

Among the other film directors, a more sceptical view on the potential of cinema dominated. Interestingly, some of those interviewed were very clear about not labelling their film as political. Even *The Petrov File*, which tells a story of a politician was described as personal, rather than political. Moreover, Balabanov adds that cinema is not capable of inducing change:

No, no movie has ever changed anything, there is no such thing. This is only my attempt to talk to people. This is a means of creating some form of conversation, discussion. But I have never wanted to do politically engaged films. [...] I'm rather trying to make films that are not anti-propaganda, but not propaganda. They encourage to ask questions rather than offering solutions. After all, the cinema was not designed to propagate and preach. We are living at a time when, if we do not serve the system, it becomes an act of civic position. That is, even not participating in the system is in itself an act of resistance (Balabanov, 2016).

Iglika Trifonova also states that there is a lack of political cinema in Bulgaria but she expressed her hope that in time there will be some distance from the past:

It seems to me that the most important film about the transition has not yet appeared and may appear later. I think it can be made by the people of your generation who have some distance from the transition, but they still care for these things. This might happen when it's been a while when it's not so painful anymore (Trifonova, 2017).

Mileva talked about the need for a temporal and emotional distance that would allow the new generation to make critical and reflective judgements about the past:

One German professor said that it takes twenty-five years for the people to start talking. So, maybe this process of *prehoda* is only natural, and it's only now when people are starting to ask questions, to analyse. If a German professor says so, we should be fine! (Mileva, 2017)

The focus group participants revealed some other vital roles of the films that they have noticed. For instance, some participants noted that cinema acts as a very strong device of 'framing' and 'reframing' the past: 'To me, this scenario is super realistic. Each one of us, so to speak, has thought that this is how it all was. But to

see it so synthesised, told in one sequence... Makes you shiver, you know' (Participant 3, 40).

According to some of the participants, cinema challenges the atomisation of society and the inconsistency of the memory policies as it 'puts it all in a sequence' (Participant 2, 28), and therefore, helps to make a step from the total fragmentation of society indicated in the analysis of the discourses of polarisation to some level of coherence. At the same time, cinema also provides some level of exaggeration, which is, nevertheless considered a justified means:

- The system is created in such a way that people would not question these things. But these films are made very well, these Bulgarian films are made to tell something to the people (Participant 15, 62).
- Yes, I agree (Participant 14, 58).
- To get inside your brain, to say 'hey, this and that happened, so and so, think about it!'. But most of the people are inside their own bubble and they don't get it. Not a lot of people now watch new Bulgarian films (Participant 15, 62).

### 5.5. Conclusion

The findings suggest that the case study films are representing history in multiple ways, and that there is a constant infusion of the past and the present, the personal and the collective, and continuity and discontinuity in the plot, which reflects the complicated essence of the transition in Bulgaria. I also argue that cinema provides a necessary mediation between these sets of oppositions, functioning as a tool of establishing a dialogue about the past and creating the necessary distance from the events of *prehoda* in order to make coming to terms with the past possible.

The interviews with the film directors revealed various roles that cinema might play in coming to terms with the communist past and the transition. The directors particularly pointed out that cinema acts not only as a type of memory work archiving the past, but also allows for a varied and more nuanced evaluation of the past avoiding the discourses of blame and violence, proposing instead a diagnosis of the Bulgarian post-1989 condition.

The focus groups show that the visualisation of history as a coherent sequence, helps the viewers relate their own personal experiences to the collective narrative.

Being able to see these events on screen in an informal setting encourages them to start a discussion, to engage in a dialogue. Thus, the opportunity to discuss the past enables the audience to regain some level of historical agency. As mediators of historical memory, these films create a more coherent image of the past, challenging the previous fragmentation and alienation from the historical events. At the same time, some elements the absurd in these films expose the disrupted essence of the Bulgarian *prehoda* and offer a more reflective appraisal of the socio-political conditions of the past.

In this chapter, I argued that cinema might provide the necessary distancing from the past in order to engage with it. Both in the focus groups and in the interviews the participants noted that, to make a rational judgement about the past, there needs to be some distance. Cinema creates another sort of a distance – not temporal, but symbolical, through mediation. Thus, the audiences do not have to address historical events directly, but rather can use cinematic representations as a ‘cover’, while also relating to both the personal and the collective levels.

Another important aspect is the role of cinema in mediating, articulating, and triggering the process of engaging with the past. Several interviewees pointed out that there needs to be a temporal distance from the past. The findings show that the division between the public and the private starting from the communist times has resulted in a similar division between the official and unofficial modes of remembering. This is reflected in the differences between the perceptions of history as a grand narrative and memory as an unofficial recollection. Memory is not only perceived as more intimate, specific, everyday, it is also traditionally more trusted in the post-communist societies, if compared to history, which is perceived as a result of an ideological manipulation. The discrepancy between the private and the public is reflected and manifested in the different ways that history and memory are perceived and treated. I suggest that cinema might provide the necessary distance which would allow to have a certain distant perspective but nevertheless provide an opportunity to engage with history through memory. I argue that cinema is an alternative mode of remembering that is not only capable of opening up a dialogue in a more informal setting, but also helps reconnect the vernacular and the official historical narratives, which is particularly vital in the Bulgarian context.

## Chapter 6 Mediated Post-Communist Nostalgia

### 6.1. Introduction

This chapter defines post-communist nostalgia and explores its critical potential towards the present in the Bulgarian context. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, there has been a particular rise of nostalgia for the communist past in most of the countries of the Eastern Bloc, attributed by some scholars to a 'great frustration with the failed promises of democracy' (Ghodsee, 2010: 523). In this research, nostalgia is understood as a memory practice mediated by particular means, and I argue that in the Bulgarian context, mediated post-communist nostalgia has a certain critical potential (Cashman, 2006).

The word *nostalgia* comes from the Greek, meaning 'longing for home', or longing for a certain space. The definition of nostalgia gradually started to incorporate a longing for a certain time in the past, therefore, drawing attention to the temporal dimension rather than the spatial one (Zembylas, 2014). As a manifestation of memory, nostalgia, naturally, is selective. In the Bulgarian case, nostalgia is directed at certain aspects of life under the regime that are lacking in the society now, including a longing for a lost sense of community, social unity and economic stability (Morariu, 2012: 293). Simultaneously, Bulgarians still express support for the democratic political system, free market economy, and freedom of speech. I would argue that such selective nostalgia is not directed at the specific regime that existed in Bulgaria, but instead, it serves as a more general indication of a loss of the past as it *should have been*. In this sense, nostalgia emerges as a critique of the shortcomings of the transition and the post-1989 present.

As Bartmanski notes, it would be a mistake to attribute nostalgia exclusively to the need to escape the problems surrounding the transition (2011). Since critique of the transition is often based on an idealistic version of the past that never actually happened, nostalgia also reveals its *constructive potential* in offering an *alternative to the present*. As Mineva notes, a nostalgic narrative proposes a 'dream for a better society' (2014: 173) challenging the hegemony of the present and imagining an alternative future. Taking into consideration some other anthropological, ethnographic and cultural factors (Morariu, 2012), we could also examine nostalgia's

role as a 'mnemonic bridge' (Bartmanski, 2011) connecting the past and the present and helping to relate to the radical changes in a meaningful way.

In order to better understand the particular role of nostalgia in contesting and negotiating the past, we need to acknowledge that nostalgia is always functioning in a specific context and is mediated by specific means. The different manifestations of nostalgia can coexist simultaneously, exposing the contested and conflictual aspects of dealing with the past. Moreover, nostalgia's contradictory modalities serve as an instrument to access the process of change and history as a contested, mobile, and dynamic process rather than a static entity. In this chapter I examine whether in the chosen case study films, mediated nostalgia (Kalinina, 2014; Lizardi, 2016) has the potential to bridge the gap between the binaries of East/West and past/present, not only by opening up a more varied public discussion about the transition but also by enabling the viewers to question the status quo existing in modern Bulgaria.

## 6.2. Post-Communist Nostalgia and its Critical Potential

A survey conveyed by Lewicka and Prusik states that, while post-communist nostalgia is affected by the positive experiences in the past, it is mostly predetermined by the negative present (2016: 691). Furthermore, Ekman and Linde note that nostalgia is 'closely related to dissatisfaction with the present system's ability to produce output' (2005: 354). However, I would note that while this role of nostalgia should not be dismissed, the productivity of the system is not the only aspect that can induce nostalgia. Nostalgia can also be a response to a lack of closure or any official historical narrative regarding the past, the abruptness of the changes, or a sense of social fragmentation and isolation after the transformations. It should also be noted that the understanding of 'output' can be different as well – it could be seen as a mainly political, economic, social or cultural failure of the transition. While a radical change in each of these domains may evoke dissatisfaction with the system's flaws, it is necessary to identify and examine the specific areas of dissatisfaction more closely.

The potential of nostalgia as a tool of resisting and challenging the rapid changes introduced in the modern world is explored in Cashman's study of the material culture in Northern Ireland (2006). Although not directly linked to the Bulgarian context, this study shows some global patterns that unify various

contemporary societies in a state of flux. Cashman explains nostalgia as a 'reactionary' cultural practice that aims at restoring and preserving the aspects of identity and community that are perceived to be threatened by the present. In this sense, nostalgia asserts its potential as a critique of modernity while becoming 'a register for critical (that is, judicious) thought that may inspire critical (that is, vitally important) action' (Cashman, 2006: 156).

Addressing the context of the former Eastern Bloc, Gigova suggests that post-communist nostalgia has the potential to specifically challenge global capitalism, which 'many Eastern Europeans have failed to "domesticate"' (2013: 542). In this context, the emergence of nostalgia can be perceived as a constructive (even if reactionary) commentary on the present, while this present essentially fails to meet the expectations of the people after the fall of the regime. Seeing nostalgia as an escapist tool denies it its political and critical value, while if we perceive nostalgia as a 'resource for working out alternatives to (post)modernity' (Koleva, 2012: 156), we can see the specific aspects of modernity that are being criticised.

In her study of the nostalgic attitudes of Bulgarians towards the communist past, based on two national surveys in 2002 and 2007, Koleva (2012) points out one of the most significant nostalgic 'longings' – the sense of loss of moral collectivism (e.g. collectivist values, sense of community and belonging). The system that replaced socialism, therefore, is viewed as the opposite: materialistic individualism was most often pointed out by her participants as a main characteristic of the present. Indeed, it can be argued that the system established in the early years after the fall of the regime was far from ideal and entirely different from what was expected and hoped for by the public. Another factor that contributed to the sense of shock and disillusionment was the abrupt and extreme nature of the changes.

In the research of working class men in post-communist Serbia, Kojanic (2015) argues that the type of capitalism developed in Central and Eastern Europe is unique and quite different from what exists in Western Europe. Kojanic agrees with Kideckel that this system should instead be labelled 'neo-capitalist' (Kideckel, 2015: 199), since in this 'immature' version of capitalism 'the institutions of the socialist state have disappeared, while new institutions of neoliberal governmentality have only just begun to emerge' (Kideckel, 2015). In this context of a lack of support from unions, the most vulnerable groups had to develop new adaptive mechanisms in order to protect themselves. Consequently, various narratives about the past

emerged as coping mechanisms, 'a technique of the self', or 'a display of agency', while the whole process of engaging with the past became 'a way of forging adaptive subjectivities' (Kojanic, 2015: 207).

Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge nostalgia as individual memory work as well as a collective adaptive mechanism. It is, moreover, possible to accept these two functions as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Indeed, as Koleva argues, nostalgia has a potential to bridge the gap between the past and the present, as well as the collective and the individual: '[nostalgia] can be seen as a way of coping with the disruption between past and present at various levels. The idea of biography (at least the European one) implies continuity; it is essential for making sense of a life' (2011: 432). Essentially, if the critical and political potential of nostalgia is acknowledged, these memories of the past can be restored as valuable once again. Without the risk of being devalued as regressive and disregarded, nostalgia manifests itself as a desire of the individuals who lived under communism to tell their story and protect their past by challenging the generalising approach so often adopted in discussions about the past in the media and the political sphere.

As a practice of memory work, or collective memory constructed informally 'from below', nostalgia, then, becomes an alternative route to establishing social continuity. Nostalgia connects the individual and the collective: the individuals can relate to the grand narrative of history and see themselves as active agents in history, as opposed to passive depoliticised subjects. At the same time, through sharing common nostalgic narratives, the individuals can relate to each other and bridge the gap existing between the varied versions of the past. As active subjects, they also can establish a critique of the status quo and the dominant ideological discourses by identifying the common sense of lack of something in the present. Identifying and openly pointing out the aspects of life that are missing from the present, the individuals are also enabled and encouraged to take a moral stance towards the present (Koleva, 2012) and, regain their agency. Nostalgia, therefore, can be interpreted as both grassroots politicised activity and everyday individual practice of memory work. Moreover, exploring the continuity and succession of history can have a liberating, empowering potential of *reconnecting with history* for those experiencing the incoherence and contradictions of *prehoda*. Post-communist mediated nostalgia, therefore, can be interpreted not just as a symptom inevitably accompanying the processes of dealing with historical trauma and social



transformation (typical of examples of post-communist countries), but also as a sign of a more constructive way of working through these problems.

Analysing the discourses surrounding the communist museums in Romania, Morariu (2012) argues that the discussions about the past are often radically polarising, not allowing for any dialogue or a more nuanced approach. The role of nostalgia as a mnemonic bridge makes even more sense when there is a need to connect the 'gaps' existing between this binary view of the post-1989 world. As Morariu notes, it is a necessity to challenge the polarising narrative, where 'communism is being re-mystified in the antagonistic narrative "bad/nostalgic/failed/East" versus "good/anti-nostalgic/victorious/West"' (2012: 308). Rabikowska also argues that the divisive binary narrative still exists, more than two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and in this context, the very notion of transition from the less developed (and often vilified) past to a progressive (and idealized) future can signal an inequality existing in the historical narratives about the communist past. Most importantly, this binary view 'annihilates the possibility of resistance against the inequalities that accompany the social and economic reforms implemented by capitalism' (Rabikowska, 2013: 267). At the same time, the memory of communism has the potential to bridge this division and question the ideological constructs of the East and the West (Rabikowska, 2013).

In the Bulgarian context, a similar tendency can be observed, since many of the flaws of the contemporary government are blamed on the communist past and the way that the transition was handled. The binary opposed views are, on the one hand, an indication of the existence of a multiplicity of views and relative freedom of expression. Nevertheless, to some extent, a radical polarisation of views is always limiting and lacking balance. As a response to such a polarisation, a necessity for nuanced representations of the transition emerges. One of the possible ways to challenge this division is to uncover the differences and seek for negotiation and a dialogue between the different notions. Morariu notes that film can potentially be such an 'alternative path' of remembering, which narratives 'can go beyond purification or glorification and can function as "reflective nostalgias" that critically engage the past as an integral part of our post-communist present' (2012: 308). Thus, cinematic representations can offer a more nuanced representation of the past which is not tied to an official version of history but instead focuses on vernacular, personal, subjective, and, therefore, multiple versions of the past.

### 6.3. Mediated Post-Communist Nostalgia and its Role as a Memory Practice of Coming to Terms with the Past

Some post-communist historical films, such as *Goodbye, Lenin!* (Becker, 2003) and *Sonnenallee* (Haußmann, 1999), are criticised for sugar-coating the past and avoiding any criticism of the socialist times in favour of indulging in the stylized details and polished material elements of the everyday life (Bonstein, 2009; Satter, 2012). Instead, some critics suggest that historical films should focus on a more realistic representation of the past and critical perception of the faults of the failed socialist system (Berdahl, 2010). For instance, exploring the issues with the nostalgic depiction of the GDR in popular culture, Jozwiak and Mermann argue that uncritical nostalgia is particularly problematic, as it ‘is in danger of glorifying a repressive regime’ (2006: 783). Several Bulgarian critics expressed similar concerns; for instance, the journalist Shopov argued that the biggest danger of nostalgia is that it forces people into a ‘passive and lazy contemplation, right at the time when there is such massive need for constructive changes’ (2016). However, as suggested in the opening of the present chapter, I argue that it is not possible to identify a film as nostalgic based on its style, narrative, or any other features analysed in isolation from the audiences. Nevertheless, since this chapter introduces the results of a focus group discussion facilitated through screening a specific clip from a case study film, it seems necessary to look into the tropes present in this film.

The following section aims to combine and link together the results of the research conducted on my field trip to Bulgaria in May-June 2017 and the textual film analysis of the representations of *prehoda* in the new Bulgarian cinema. In particular, I offer a reading of the film *The World is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner* and, more specifically, its opening scene, as an example of the use of some nostalgic tropes. In order to provide more context for the further data analysis of the focus groups in this section, I have chosen to analyse the nostalgic tropes in the same scene that I used to frame the discussions in the focus groups.

#### **Textual film analysis of the opening of *The World is Big, and Salvation Lurks around the Corner* (Stephan Komandarev, 2007)**

An extract from *The World* was used as a starting point in the focus group in order to evaluate the potential of such films to initiate a discussion and negotiation

of nostalgic leanings. The opening of the film tells the backstory of the protagonist Sashko (Alexander) who is also the narrator of this particular scene. Sashko introduces his parents and his grandparents one by one, talking about the life that he and his family had in socialist Bulgaria. In the first frame of the film, the protagonist announces: 'My life started on 15th of September 1975. Somewhere in the Balkans where Europe ends but never starts'.

His narration continues when he introduces his grandmother Sladka trying to find sugar in the shops in order to make some cakes and pastries to celebrate Sashko's birthday. It was evident from the following sequence that there is a lack of sugar in the shops: people are standing in lines in front of grocery stores to get even the basic household goods. Nevertheless, the following depiction of the life in Sashko's hometown is quite idyllic: a street in a small town with cobbled pavement and traditional Bulgarian houses, the sun is shining, the street leads to a picturesque view of a mountain, and a group of elderly men is gathered around a table playing backgammon in a summer café with a terrace. Despite the apparent shortage of goods in the stores, everybody seems happy and cheerful, everybody knows each other, and the town looks safe and peaceful. The next scene shows a family dinner celebration of Sashko's birth, everybody is smiling and laughing, and Sladka managed to find sugar after all – the table is full with all kind of traditional pastries and cakes. The camera approaches the family, and the scene ends with a close up of the happy baby Sashko.

Twenty years later, the scene is marked by a radical change in colour and sound – the colours are colder, and the family is in a car sitting quietly. They are now in Germany; the motorway is wide and clear; some western pop music is playing on the car radio. Other than that, no one is speaking; they look sad and tired.

Overall, the extract indicates some idealisation of the past, in particular, judging by its visual style (tinted, bright smooth colours), as well as the humorous take on the past focused on the mundane everyday life under communism. The colour scheme used for the film is the typical 'historical' filter, as seen through a tinted *sepia* lens. The light is smooth, and the colour scheme is limited to warm beige, yellow and brown tones.

As Fevry notes 'sepia cinema' is 'profoundly ahistorical' (2017: 64), or blind to certain historical events, even if it takes place in a certain period and some historical

events are directly referred to in the narrative. Thus, instead of looking closely at the 'grand historical narratives' within the state or national framework, these films focus on the private and domestic domain. In *The World*, similar logic is present since the narrative develops around a very intimate storyline of one particular family. I would argue, however, that the film does not seem to reject history altogether. Instead, through focusing on the private and the everyday, it bridges the gap between the complex and uncertain political and social implications of the transition in one particular family.

It is through the personal narratives and family relationships that the audience could relate to the 'grand narrative' of history. The narrator of *The World* is born in 1975, a period of relative economic stagnation but general political stability (Zhivkov has already been the leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party for more than twenty years), when, as the narrative suggests, a rationing system was in place. It seems that the most crucial moments (including 1989) in the history of Bulgaria are hinted at, but not represented or reflected on explicitly. For example, the infiltration by state security agents and the total surveillance is hinted on through the scene in the café when Bai Dan is spied on by a seemingly innocent regular customer. The very fact that the state security closely followed Bai Dan because he was involved in the uprisings in Prague, also narrates the historical milestones through a story of one family. Further, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall are not depicted through archive footage, as in other films like *Tilt*, *Viktoria*, *The Petrov File*, but rather are presented as the events on the background that all happened when Sashko and his parents had already escaped Bulgaria.

Despite being on the background, these events are still vital to the narrative development, since it is the situation in the state, including repressions, corruption and lack of freedom, that pushes the family to emigrate, and it is the fall of the regime that finally allows Sashko to return to Bulgaria and to cross the borders of the EU freely on his way. I would argue that the subtlety and internalisation of the process of memory building are not in any way creating a barrier that is 'blind to history', but rather, creates a much-needed connection between the individual and the collective. It is possible that this role of films with clear nostalgic tropes is to 'mobilise a family memory that appears more efficient than State memory' (Fevry, 2017: 64) in the process of coming to terms with the past. The instruments that are used for this

mobilisation are the particular sound and colour that allude to the traditional values and family, for instance, *sepia* is a direct reference to old family photo albums.

Another trope used in *sepia* films is the specific, and sometimes excessive, focus on the material details of the everyday life, once again reconnecting the private and the collective through the mundane, understandable objects. The 'Exemplary Home' plaque is one such object instantly associated with the order and safety of a typical communist home which is kept in order. This is a plaque given by the local council to particularly clean and nice looking houses in socialist Bulgaria. Another example of the material objects on set that are referring to the past include the traditional Bulgarian pastries, which are associated by most with the socialist times. These traditional pastries were served in small Bulgarian cafes or *sladkarnica*'s, as well as sweet lemonade. This association framework is also relevant for the younger audience who can still remember it through their parents or grandparents.

The location is not explicitly stated in the narrative, but from the panoramic shots of the town, it is clear that the flashback scene was filmed in Karlovo, a small picturesque town situated in the Central Balkan National Park. Even on the visual level, Karlovo also seems a logical choice to represent a haven, or a rural escape from a big city – an idyllic small town where the time stops.

On the other hand, it seems that the choice of location is significant for the overall narrative of Bulgaria's rich history and traditions to restore memories and the identity of the protagonist. Karlovo is an important town in this respect, not only economically (it is known for the production of rose oil – a traditional Bulgarian export), but also historically, as it is promoted for tourist purposes as one of the earliest Thracian capitals (Karlovo.bg). Another historical reference that contributes to the status of Karlovo as the 'historical town' is that it is also the birthplace of Vasil Levski – one of the most admired national heroes, who initiated the process of the 'national liberation' from the Ottoman rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The idyllic scenery and historical references are accompanied by a corresponding sound – the background music of the opening scene is light folk, using musical instruments that are typical for the Balkans, such as the *kaval*, a flute played by mountain shepherds. The narrator speaks Bulgarian with a slight accent, clearly showing that he not only left Bulgaria long ago but also successfully adapted

to his new way of life and new home country. It might be argued that the focus on traditionalism indicates a certain level of self-exoticism in this film, which is supported by the fact that the main protagonist is not *fully* Bulgarian anymore and thus, sees the orientalist image of the Balkans from a different, more distanced perspective.

On another level, spiritualism is highlighted as a traditional value, which also includes the high importance of the family values. The scene of the happy family celebration communicates closeness, togetherness, and warmth. It can be argued that this is not related to the communist period in Bulgarian history, but rather to the time in the life of the protagonist, in other words, this is nostalgia for his childhood rather than for socialism itself. This might be true, however, it seems that within this episode in the past, not only Sashko is comfortable and protected, but also his whole family is happier and connected.

The feeling of togetherness is also represented in the scene, where Bai Dan is introduced playing backgammon in the corner café. The closeness of this social group is striking, and the café itself is the heart of the local community, it is lively and friendly, a place, where everyone knows each other well. At the same time, the depiction of the café contributes to the traditionalist hierarchy of a small Bulgarian town, because it is exclusively male and of the same age group, thus not very inclusive but rather, traditionally patriarchal. The sense of community is one of the typical nostalgic tropes, especially in a film about the socialist past characterised by a more collectivist orientation.

A simple system of hierarchy also characterises this particular example of a male traditionalist local community – the man who wins the game is ‘crowned’ as the King of Backgammon. Generally, within the group everyone treats others with respect, playing by the rules and there is no ‘bad blood’ in the group, despite the ongoing competition. Later in the film, Sasho is almost initiated by being introduced to the rest of the men – he enters the game, and even though everyone in the local neighbourhood knows him, he is accepted fully as a member of the group only after his first win. This scene also alludes to an idea of a simpler time with a strict hierarchy, where respect and order are in place. To develop this argument further, I must note that the streets in the film are clearly clean and safe, there is no traffic or any danger characteristic of modern urban centres.

The safety of a simpler world order might also serve to highlight the contrast in rising inequality in post-1989 Bulgaria. For example, the people standing in line by the shop are all dressed similarly – a cardigan and trousers or skirts. The colours of their clothing are subdued (brownish, beige, black and grey). However, most of them are wearing a crisp white shirt with the collar showing, which could be a suggestion that they might have had fewer clothes, but this was enough to look presentable.

Overall, the nostalgia for social equality is repeatedly pointed out in many national surveys in Bulgaria (Trend, 2017; Sofia Platform, 2016). The proof that there was a more equal society is communicated through the episode where everyone is standing in line together, where no one is privileged in any way. Even if in reality, there was still a significant class division in society, standing in line was portrayed as a collective experience, promoting further the illusion of equality. Standing in line is also in itself a collective experience which now might be perceived as lost: once again, there is a certain order, and people are talking to each other and gossiping. Therefore, the very process of standing in line is so much more than just the act of buying a product – it is also a social act.

Finally, the overall sense of safety and togetherness is contrasted to the present day in the last scene of the analysed extract, where the characters are driving a car in Germany twenty years later. Despite the evidence that this country is much more progressive and developed, as suggested by the full motorways and the number of wind turbines by the road, something is missing from the scene. A sense of danger is present then, indicated by the cooler colour scheme, the music, the tired and even angry faces of the passengers in the car, the complete lack of communication between them and even symbolically, a close-up shot of the dice rolling by the front window.

Apart from the depiction of some material artefacts, nostalgia often goes hand in hand with a particular way of depicting the historical events in a more light-hearted or humorous way. For instance, in *The World* a fundamental problem – the deficit of the basic products like sugar from the shops – is mentioned, but then immediately we see that this is perceived with humour and turns out to be a minor concern for the family (the scene of them joking about Fidel Castro personally sending them sugar from Cuba). Another example of downplaying the seriousness of the shortcomings of the regime is the scene with the militia officer in the café, where the official is observing the backgammon players in a café, but they seem to be openly

ironic about his 'warm Lenin-like look'. This serves as a proof that there is no fear of the militia, and anybody is allowed to make fun of the state: Bai Dan's character even threatens to hit him with the backgammon. Quite obviously, it seems rather unlikely for anyone to mock the militia openly during Soviet times even in Bulgaria.

Similarly, in *Zift*, Javor Gardev argues that the comic elements were used to reduce the levels of pathos and, thus, take some of the pressure away by also reducing the seriousness of the depiction of the past. This, however, as he states, evoked an adverse reaction in some of the viewers who felt that the humour is a way of ridiculing and, thus, devaluating the past: 'This irony takes away the pathos towards the period. So, these people, they require a certain pathos in relation to the past, because they do not allow for it to be viewed from this perspective (Gardev, 2017).

I would argue, however, that this humorous approach is an example of a more diverse and balanced view of the past because it reduces the level of pathos and opens up a dialogue about the varied problems that existed in the past. Such a view also shows that there was still life under the regime, that there were still dreams and hopes, and thus, the experiences of the audience who lived during that time are not devalued, since their existence under the regime is not depicted in an entirely negative manner.

#### 6.4. The ambivalence of nostalgia and its apoliticisation

The extract from *The World* analysed above was used as a facilitating framework for the focus groups. The participants were asked to communicate their impressions of the clip. More specifically, they were asked if they thought the clip was a realistic depiction of the past and if they felt nostalgic about it.

It seems that the participants perceived the films primarily as a starting point for a discussion – everyone started recalling their own stories or the stories they remembered being told in their families. The discussion also revealed that, contrary to what the textual film analysis indicates, the audience did not view these scenes as nostalgic at first, proving that the media are not necessarily vehicles that bring nostalgic sensations directly to the audiences, who passively accept these affections as their own. This hesitance contributes to my argument that even films that have nostalgic tropes are not necessarily perceived as nostalgic by the



audience. For example, in one of the focus groups, Participant 12 subverts the expectations about the perception of Fevry's 'sepia' cinema<sup>8</sup> as nostalgic, because he describes the scenes shot in sepia as grey, colourless and lifeless: 'This film is not about nostalgia; it shows that something was missing! It shows that everything was grey!' (Participant 12, 43). It is clear that for this participant, sepia is an indication of the lack of freedom of expression under the regime, rather than a sign of a warm and safe homeland of the childhood.

Furthermore, some of the participants felt offended by the suggestion that they might be nostalgic. It became evident from the discussions emerging in the focus groups and interviews that there is a quite negative understanding of the very idea of post-communist nostalgia. In quite strong terms, such nostalgia is often dismissed as uncritical, conservative or even viewed as regressive and dangerous. In a similar vein, Boyer argues that, after the unification of Germany, the true reason behind the discourses of blaming the 'nostalgics' for their 'pastness' lies in 'the desire of its West German owners and operators to achieve an unburdened future via the repetitive signalling of the past obsession of East Germans' (2006: 363). Thus, it is important to be sensitive to the normative aspects of the discourses of blame based on the idea of being stuck in the past.

In the Bulgarian case, post-communist nostalgia is often attributed only to the older or uneducated generations. For example, two participants under thirty in two different groups, independently of each other used the same quote to mock their nostalgic grandparents, mentioning their nostalgia for 'Bai Tosho' – the nickname for Todor Zhivkov<sup>9</sup> used in a friendly even if slightly ironic way: 'While there are still people who say "Oh, how great it was while Bai Tosho was in charge", we will never move forward [progress]. While there still are people who support socialism we will never come out of this transition' (Participant 5, 23). The same quote was used by Participant 2: 'Naturally, all grannies and granddads, they all say "Oh, how great it was during communism, with Bai Tosho"' (Participant 2, 28).

Notably, in Soviet ideology, socialism was the embodiment of a more progressive and future-oriented version of modernity than capitalism (Bauman,

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<sup>8</sup> The concept of 'sepia cinema' is used by Fevry (2017: 64) to describe a nostalgic cycle of French films made in the 2000s.

<sup>9</sup> The leader of the People's Republic of Bulgaria from 1954 until the fall of the regime in November 1989

1991: 264), which, however, changed drastically after the fall of communism, when a 'new global "truth" has come to equate socialism with historical stagnation' (Brandtstädter, 2007: 132). Not surprisingly then, other participants are not eager to admit that they have nostalgia; instead, they vigorously deny it and even suggest that it could be *impossible* for them to feel nostalgia. As one Participant 3 states: 'If you swap a donkey for a horse, you don't feel nostalgic for the horse. You immediately forget about the donkey!' (40).

Another reason why nostalgia is viewed as a negative sign is the fact that it is associated with being in a privileged position either during communist times or after the transition:

- The older people are definitely nostalgic. The younger, maybe not everyone, but some still are (Participant 6, 22)
- Particularly, those who were favoured by the regime, I mean, who got land and real estate. Those are nostalgic too! (Participant 8, 22)

The discourse of blame and some signs of confrontation are present in other discussions as well, which makes it understandable when some participants (in particular, the two more senior groups of 75+) feel the need to excuse themselves and justify any ideas that could be considered 'communist':

My father has been under trial and was sentenced to two years by the communists, he doesn't even know what for. We are all anti-communists in our family, every one of us. My uncle spent ten years in the Belene camp. My aunt was imprisoned... My father banned the red colour at our home! But this thing that we are living in now – don't even get me started! [...] Now, my brother calls me a communist when I say that I don't like how we are living now. He says 'Take Dad's dossier and read!'. It's horrifying, it is a disgusting thing. He calls me a communist! No, I'm not a communist, it's just what we have at the moment is disgusting, we now live in awful and scary times, unfortunately! (Participant 14, 58)

Similarly, in another senior group the participants are also afraid that they will be considered communists if they criticise the present in any way:

It's not that there is nothing good about the new era, don't think that we praise socialism! Because then freedom was taboo. Now, it's true that freedom is

the greatest good that we have, that we gained. Freedom of speech. But some understand freedom as arbitrariness, not as true freedom – freedom to create (Participant 18, 76).

While the analysis of the response of the younger participants and the filmmakers shows that they have definitely been affected by a negative discursive framing of nostalgia, I would like to note that the older participants were still able to criticise the present by referring to the past. When the older participants felt that they were listened to, and after carefully excusing themselves for their views, they were able to use their nostalgic leanings as a social critique effectively. In other words, even if their accounts were limited by the overwhelming negative discourse of blaming the ‘nostalgics’, they were not entirely stopped by it. Such a multifaceted view of the past suggests that different modalities of nostalgia can co-exist and engage in a dialogue.

An alternative view suggests that nostalgia is impossible for a different reason – because there is not enough distance from the past, or, even, that one cannot be nostalgic for something, if it is not over yet, such as the aftermath of the regime in Bulgaria. One of the participants in particular notes that he cannot be nostalgic, because he only recently left his hometown which, as opposed to Sofia, is still very close to the socialist past on a mundane level. This merge of the spatial and temporal axis, once again, indicates the enormous gap between the rural and the urban areas in Bulgaria.

A very negative view of nostalgia could also be observed in some of the interviews, where Mileva notes that the new Bulgarian socialists who are nostalgic for the past were present at one of their screenings where they criticised capitalism. Mileva states that these socialists were, in fact, the descendants of the former apparatchiks who provided them with the resources to study abroad, where they have picked up their leftist ideas:

So he says ‘Well, this capitalism – what good has it brought us?’ So we say ‘Dear, if you were wearing flip-flops and living in some tent, I would believe that you are a socialist. But who has sent you to study at Goldsmith, or Sorbonne? Who gave you the suitcases with money to pay for it?’ (Mileva, 2017).

Chouchkov (*Tilt*) is quite sceptical when asked about post-communist nostalgia in Bulgaria. In my interview with him, he even labels such nostalgia as 'false', or a nostalgia mainly conditioned by the longing for their own youth or childhood. He states that even those people who express some sympathy towards the communist past, do not actually want to bring it back:

Well, I wouldn't say there is nostalgia. There is powerful propaganda. [...] Rather, many people simply long for their younger years, their past. They say how calm and safe it was then, when they were young... This is the reason behind this 'false nostalgia'. Of course, there were good things, and I am not in denial... But there were a lot more negative things for me, such as the social system, socialism, communism, which was never even reached in fact (Chouchkov, 2017).

Similarly, the political aspect of cinema is regarded as something negative in the cultural sphere by the filmmakers who explicitly say that they would like to avoid being associated with politics. For example, Hristov notes that his political and social awareness was unavoidable in the film, even though politics is something he wholeheartedly hates (Hristov, 2017). At the same time, Chouchkov talks about some positive aspects of the past which are now absent in the cultural sphere. For example, he states that some things like censorship should never be brought back, while there are some things that were positive for the cultural sphere, including state financial support: 'Because the whole cultural sphere was supported by the state then; there was a focus on cinema, funding for cinema, writers, artists, all those trade unions that helped the industry financially' (Chouchkov, 2017).

I would argue that the films shown during the focus groups were not seen as nostalgic by the audiences, because, once again, nostalgia was associated with a one-dimensional biased and regressive view of the past, while the films were perceived as critical and reflective:

The good thing is that these young directors are from this part of society that sees things in the past and the present for what they were. They tell these stories about the past and criticise it and reflect on it. But there is a large part of the society that cherishes their memories of the past when they lived well, when they were favoured, when they had all their party privileges. It's a good thing that we don't have such films. We do not have such films that encourage

nostalgia. There is a nostalgia in the society, but it is not reflected in the movies (Participant 16, 79).

Another aspect that also contributes to the argument about the depoliticisation of nostalgia is that the political/collective is opposed to the individual/personal/mundane:

- As far as I can see, this is the everyday life of the people, not the political situation (Participant 2, 28).
- Let me tell you... Maybe, you go back to your childhood and remember certain things, and now, when you see them on screen, you inevitably have a flashback. Surely, one's memory is selective. We choose to remember only the more pleasant moments, rather than unpleasant. This would result in nostalgia, at least it did for me. I remembered the lemonade and how they sent me to buy beer by bike, things like that (Participant 3, 40).

This comment shows that the participant is nostalgic, but at the same time, he clearly identifies that his memory is selective, personal rather than political. He also fully acknowledges the negative aspects of the past, but also understands that in the specific moment of feeling nostalgic for one's childhood, it is possible to forget to be critical.

The most regressive aspect of post-communist nostalgia seems to be connected with the association of communism with discourses of laziness. According to some of the participants, since everybody was guaranteed a job, and the income was roughly equal and not necessarily tied to the quality of the work or the quantity of the product, it is believed that this cultivated a lazy attitude:

- The hard-working [Bulgarian] has disappeared during communism (Participant 3, 40).
- Yes, he has disappeared without a trace. So now we only deal with lazy people. (Participant 2, 28).
- Well, here we are all exceptions from this rule... (Participant 3, 40).
- Well, there are exceptions, but the majority of those who come for an interview here [in the company], are lazy and want communism, and have nostalgia. (Participant 2, 28).

- Even people who haven't lived during communism, still want it to come back (Participant 1, 25).
- Yes, even those... (Participant 2, 28).
- Everyone wants to do less and have a 1200\$ salary (Participant 1, 25).
- Minimum! (Participant 3, 40).
- To work 4-6 hours a day, if possible... (Participant 1, 25)
- If possible, three days a week. (Participant 2, 28).

Here it is evident, that the discourse surrounding the idea of collectivism and equal salaries, associates communism with being idle, and subsequent nostalgia for the better past, while in the market economy this laziness is eliminated through tough competition and financial inequality. In another group with younger participants, they also adopt the discourses of blame and adaptation when talking about the working class as dependant on the government. It is perceived that the working class was somewhat privileged under socialism in Bulgaria. One of the participants recalls a story told by his grandfather that describes the cult of labour in the socialist regime:

Everything that the state produced was exported, it was enough for everyone in the country, but it was exported abroad. There were markets, huge market, everything was bought and sold. So there was work for everyone. That was what my grandfather told me before he became a colonel: "We went to the cafes, caught someone who was just drinking coffee, we went to get his workbook to see what was written there. If he were employed but wasn't at work at the moment, we would ask him why he was not at work. No matter what was his reason, we would put him back to work. If we catch someone who does not work, we will take him for 72 hours in detention, in this 72 hours we would find him a job and send him to work". Then there was no unemployment, no poor people, nor too wealthy people – everyone was the same (Participant 8, 22).

It should be noted here that, despite the negative attitude towards the past, this participant expresses some typical nostalgic longings for a past that is more protected and wealthy. At the same time, the idea of unification of pay seems to be a problematic issue for the respondents. They also suggest that this class equality resulted in overall laziness and reliance on the state:

- Yes, but we can see the results of this right now (Participant 8, 22).
- Because then a guy who was a doctor with an education had the same salary as the guy who dug dirt in a village... So now... We all have higher education, and no one has a job. We're a generation with 100% higher education, is that right? (Participant 5, 23)
- We graduate and have to do something completely different... (Participant 7, 23)

A similar argument can be seen in another younger group:

- At the moment, there is no working class in this country. These specialists are missing, there are no factories where they get the experience. My father graduated in the 89. He is an engineer; he works with electronics. When he graduated, he worked in a small business and at the time of the changes, the businesses themselves began to disappear, and a fairly large group of people was out of work. Seriously, 40 per cent of the state. Then even more ... For example, turners, turners are now gone. There are no tailors. (Participant 8, 22).
- No, the professions have not disappeared. For example, my father works in a business, he also said that he needed young people, he wanted to employ young people, but he couldn't find anyone. They all wanted to work with a computer. It is because our parents lived at that time when everyone got the same salary, no matter what they did. That's why half of the people are not used to work in Bulgaria. They think their state is obliged to give them a job. No, it's not! And yes, young people don't want to do physical work. Okay, it is fine now, but what are we going to do in 20 years? (Participant 5, 23)

Interestingly, in this dialogue, two contradictory blaming strategies are used – Participant 8 blames the state or the factory for the destruction of the working class in Bulgaria, while Participant 5 blames the people for not being hard-working enough. Such contradictory views are not rare for the younger participants who seem to be continually switching from blaming one party to the other.

In another younger group, the discussion leads to the conclusion that because of the paternalistic expectations of 'some people', there is now effectively no working class in Bulgaria, although it seems that there is some conflation of concepts here, with the working class equated to hard-working ('rabotna' vs 'rabotnicheska klasa')

are used as interchangeable terms):

Even my mom feels nostalgic from time to time because it was more relaxed at work. So to speak, whether you work or don't work, you still get your money, and now ... In my family, for example, there is an inside joke "this is what happens when you work in the private sector". Now that everyone is working in the private sector, you have to work much harder. From this point of view, yes, there is nostalgia, but I'm not sure it was the right thing to tolerate laziness (Participant 2, 28).

It seems that the participants in these three younger groups see themselves as hard-working and somewhat underprivileged because they did not experience socialism, when, supposedly, anyone was guaranteed a solid job and a stable income. This sense of being deprived of the basic benefits of socialism understandably develops into anxiety and frustration with the group that is constructed by the official discourse as the unadaptable and, thus, lazy – the working class. It also seems that their evaluation of the reasons behind the deterioration of the working class is quite blurry and controversial.

There is a difference in the perceptions of the past between the two different generations – those who experienced communism first-hand and those who do not have personal recollections but have postmemories transmitted to them from their parents and grandparents. Postmemories (Hirsch, 2002) can be both negative and positive (nostalgic). Their ambivalence is not a dichotomy but a natural state of being – no memory is pure or devoid of mixed emotional response. However, the reaction to the ambivalence of these memories is different for the two groups. The older participants seem to openly acknowledge that both versions of the past existed simultaneously and did not eliminate each other. The older generations have their own ambivalent experience to guide them through their conflicting perceptions of the past, which is why they were able to articulate the ambivalence of nostalgia more clearly.

### 6.5. Nostalgia and the Adaptation Discourse

It should be noted that the meaning of the adaptation discourse is radically different for those who experienced communism and those who were born after the fall of the regime. The younger participants did not have to adapt to the changes in



the way that their parents and grandparents had to. The younger participants did not experience the alternative to *prehoda*, and most of them started their careers in entirely different circumstances. For the older generations, the adaptation holds more literal meaning, as they had to transfer their knowledge and accept the radically different way of life after 1989.

At the same time, for the younger participants, the adaptation has a different meaning, as they are primarily relating to communism from a distant point of view since they have not lived it. As with any memories of communism, the meaning of adaptation for them is distanced and mediated both through the media and the memories of others. Nevertheless, the younger generation might still experience the need to adapt, even if in a different sense. They are the first generation to live in the new society, and they do not have older generations' experience to help them adapt. It could be argued, therefore, that at times of radical changes, the trauma of adaptation is spread through various generations affecting both those who had to adapt in the literal sense and those who were essentially on their own.

In this context, the younger generations were figuring out the new order without the help from the more experienced previous generations whose experience might have become obsolete in the changing circumstances. Both generations, therefore, struggled to adapt, even if for different reasons. Simultaneously, the younger generations are forced to make their judgements about the past based solely on the seemingly contradictory postmemories that they inherited from the preceding generations. Moreover, these memories are always emotionally charged and, thus, influential and hold an important role in how they evaluate the past that they have never experienced themselves. This combination of ambivalent, emotionally charged memories and a lack of personal experience of the events, inevitably creates a fragmented, confusing state of memory that is fractured, and, ultimately, does not make sense. It is not surprising then that the younger generation's responses regarding their evaluations of the legacies of communism were more contradictory and blurry.

Even though the older participants felt the need to justify or defend their opinions, it was evident that they had a quite elaborate understanding of the past. They explicitly and repeatedly insisted that they were aware that socialism was not 'all good'. The younger participants, however, did not demonstrate such a confident relationship with the past. Arguing that 'while there are still nostalgic people there

will be no progress', they still expressed quite obvious nostalgic views on the past 'when everything seemed to be more relaxed and safe'. While arguing that the working class disappeared under socialism due to everyone being paid the same amount of money, they still felt that the present post-1989 Bulgaria did not offer them enough opportunities to succeed in their careers. While criticising the excessive reliance on the state in the communist times, they still felt anxious and insecure about their lack of social benefits when they retire.

It is understandable that obtaining seemingly contradictory negative and nostalgic postmemories from the previous generations is confusing and creates an ambivalent image of the past. It seems that the discussions helped the younger participants recognise these inconsistencies in their views. For example, the comment about the films putting it all 'in a sequence'. Perhaps, the films not only made these participants think but also the need to express their views to the rest of the group made them take a stance and adopt a more critical view. Films, thus, helped kick-start an evaluation of the past for some of the participants who, admittedly, 'never thought about this in their everyday life' (Participant 5, 23). The need to make sense of contradictory postmemories led to a need to explore the ambivalent, contested, conflictual ideas that they had about communism.

Establishing an intergenerational dialogue is also an important factor in restoring coherence. This aspect was present in the middle-aged groups, where there was a mix of 25 years old and 40+ years old. As Hirsch and Spitzer argue:

Having inherited shards of memory, positive and negative, we could not hope to reunite the fragments. Instead, our journey remained a process of searching—a creative vehicle of contact and transmission enabling an encounter between nostalgic and negative memory (2002: 263).

It is crucial, therefore, to have more of these discussions in the future with more mixed groups to facilitate an interchange of opinions. Firstly, because by showing various recollections of the past on screen, both first and second generations get to experience different readings of the past put in a coherent emotional narrative, that is destined to evoke a response. Secondly, because for the first generations, it provides an opportunity to speak up about their experiences and be listened to, while the mediated nature of this engagement allows them to keep some distance from their problematic views – making it easier to relate to the past through some

abstract categories present in the film narrative. At the same time, the younger, second generation gets the opportunity to, first of all, become aware of their own conflicting and ambivalent postmemories of the past and become reflective and critical through this acknowledgement. Furthermore, they are able to restore the lost sense of historical coherence by communicating both with their peers and with those who experienced communism first-hand. It is through such a “point of memory”—a point of intersection between time and space, personal and cultural recollection’ (Hirsch & Spitzer, 2002) that dialogue becomes possible and can become formative.

I would note that the discussions left some of the participants quite confused, especially when they were challenged by their inability to explain the reasons for the economic hardships today on a macro level. They resorted to blaming the Other, which in this case, turned out to be the average stereotypical post-communist nostalgic. Their confusion was evident, for instance, when they discussed the fact that no one wants to do physical labour anymore – one of the participants hesitantly noted that they, as students of architecture, also aimed at finding a job in an office.

Another participant expressed his frustration with the divide between Sofia and the rural area where he was born, and yet, he stated that he did not want to do physical work and stay in his village where the salaries were low and the unemployment significantly higher than in the urban areas. It seems, therefore, that the participants in these groups declared their hopelessness, even though, in their own conceptual framework, they have done everything to ‘adapt’ to the existing world order. As Kideckel and Riabchuk note, the danger of the adaptation discourse lies in its inability to produce any kind of alternative to the existing system, since anyone who wishes to become successful in the framework of this version of modernity has to ‘adapt to new socio-economic realities, even if this [...] means that they will become even more exploited’ (Riabchuk, 2009: 62).

The problematic nature of the adaptation discourse is further analysed by Riabchuk (2009), as she argues that the adaptation itself is an embodiment of the individualistic materialist ideology that is generally insensitive to any possible structural barriers. The negative implications of the adaptation discourse are in the further marginalisation of the post-communist working classes and the uncritical legitimising the system of class inequalities during the transition to a market economy. As Kideckel (2015) observes in his analysis of the working class in a Romanian context, there is a distorted image of the privileged position of the working

class in the socialist past. This leads to a negative perception of the working class and a discourse of adaptation, or lack of it, and, consequently, blame. The working class is blamed for not being able to adapt and, in its turn, this contributes to the stress of the unemployment and lack of safety of the already marginalised groups. Therefore, they become prone to feeling nostalgic for the communist past as a coping mechanism. The working class is, therefore compared to the normative image of the 'ideal middle-class type' (Riabchuk 2009) and generally portrayed as non-adaptive, or worse, lacking a 'work ethic with a resulting lack of productivity, generalized dishonesty, and the expectation of getting something for nothing' (Kideckel, 2015: 118).

In the present research, the negative image of the working class as an 'angry anachronism' (Kideckel: 2015, 128) seems to be extended to any other social group that is perceived as 'nostalgic'. In particular, this emerged when the participants mentioned their grandparents as prime examples of those prone to post-communist nostalgia. In their case, it becomes even more evident that their more nostalgic version of collective memory is completely disregarded as regressive. It is understandable that, as the previous chapter shows, these respondents feel the need to defend their memories and reclaim their past as valuable and worthy of attention. My suggestion would be that this confusion in the younger respondents is caused primarily by the dominance of the binary approach that predetermines discussions around the evaluation of the socialist legacy.

I would conclude that in the focus groups and the interviews, the understanding of nostalgia is mostly negative. The 'past', in its turn, is conflated with the communist regime, and nostalgia is seen in its restorative version (Boym, 2011). It is evident from the discussions above, that nostalgia is denied its critical and political potential, and is manifested in the public discourse as something dangerous. Such attitudes contribute to the argument that post-communist nostalgia is condemned in modern Bulgaria. Thus the dichotomies of communism/capitalism and East/West are still very much present in the public discourse.

Nevertheless, the discussions that followed revealed that the participants still have a balanced view of the past and the present, acknowledging both the good and the bad of both worlds. Moreover, nostalgia was present in various forms in the focus groups with all age groups. Even if denied on the level of the manifestations, the critical potential of nostalgia was fully realised in the discussions where the past

and the present were compared. While denying having nostalgia, some of the participants still expressed a typically nostalgic outlook on some of the aspect of the past. It can be argued that the ambivalent and conflicting manifestations of nostalgia revealed its critical potential as a conceptual bridge. A reflective, multidimensional view of the past was revealed even in the most stereotypically nostalgic older audiences, who made it clear that the material commodification of the past did not cloud their vision. It becomes clear then that the nostalgic leanings are not as rose-tinted as they are often accused of being. Moreover, a discussion resulting from the nostalgic emotional attitude towards the past may lead to a balanced and constructive dialogue avoiding the discourses of blame.

The younger participants identified the negative consequences of the transition and were quite critical of the loss of security and social care. They also felt that there was more stress and less protection, increasing as they had to work long hours, usually in a job that is different from what they were trained for in higher education. Nevertheless, despite such a pessimistic view, the only coping mechanism they explicitly suggested was hard work. To some extent, their frustration about the shortcomings of the present did not lead to a manifested desire for social change, while the discourse of adaptation dominated these discussions. Moreover, they explicitly differentiated themselves from those who may feel nostalgic about the past, following the logic of blame: since they had no right to be nostalgic, those who actually were nostalgic were labelled as lazy, unable to adapt, old-fashioned, seen as the Other that remains the main obstacle on the path to success. At the same time, the dialogue and the conflict between the participants revealed the controversies and inconsistencies that existed in their narrative about the present and the past. It can be argued that the discussion even led to the realisation of the lack of alternatives, or even a dead-end:

The fact is that healthcare, culture, education are all at a terrible level, with a terrible material base and minimum wages. That's what my peers and I can say here. That we, people who live in the transition, have seen no other way of life than this *prehoda* (Participant 2, 28).

While a further investigation is required to evaluate the effects of this realisation in the future and the action that emerged or did not emerge from it, we need to acknowledge that at least, the lack of alternatives became crystallised in the discussion. A devaluation of post-communist nostalgia, therefore, is another sign of

the dominant binary discourse where the political debates are still evolving around the binary of capitalism and communism, the east and the west, the past and the present. No nostalgia means no possibility of an alternative, because the past is unequivocally condemned, which leaves us with only one version of modernity, that of neoliberalism or neocapitalism. Nostalgia's enabling potential lies in the possibility of a dialogue built around representations that are multiple, can be understood outside the usual binaries and interpreted differently. Thus, mediated nostalgia allows for a more open discussion of the alternatives, challenging the usual reductive discourse surrounding the evaluation of the past.

#### 6.6. Post-Communist Nostalgia as a Social Critique of *prehoda*

In the discussions, some of the participants pointed out that the extract made them think about some things that have changed nowadays, and which they were missing. The discussion often led to a comparison of the past with the present, especially in the context of the things that are perceived as lost. First responses to the screened film clip were mainly centred around the sense of community and safety depicted in the film. Later on in the discussion, however, it became clear that the feeling of isolation, fragmentation, and insecurity were mainly rooted in the economic consequences of *prehoda*, including unemployment, poor social care (the younger participants mentioned worries about low pensions), lack of financial support in the education, healthcare and cultural sphere. Another implicit reason behind the social isolation that was mentioned in the discussions was the necessity of economic migration, especially among the younger generation. This historically rooted critique of the present can be analysed as a *sense of loss*, or, as Koleva suggests, a 'narrative of historical loss' (2012, 154).

There was also a clear differentiation between younger and older respondents. The younger participants observed some losses as well, but it was mainly the older participants who focused on the narrative of a loss most. More specifically, they explicitly linked the losses with the change in the regime and the external 'macro' factors, while the younger participants tend to explain the losses as a result of unsuccessful adaptation (internal factors). These concerns resonate with the result of a recent national survey, where the respondents were asked to reflect on their associations with the communist era in Bulgaria (Trend, 2017). The most popular responses were 'jobs for everyone/no unemployment' (16%), 'safety, good life for

ordinary people' (11%), 'free and high- quality healthcare' (8%) and 'free and high-quality education' (7%) (Trend, 2017).

In a similar vein, in all focus groups, the topic of the loss of social care was dominant. One of the participants, a school teacher in a small town, expressed her disappointment with the state of education in modern Bulgaria, in comparison with the way that it was before: 'So, to me, the worst thing is that they ruined our good education, they destroyed the specialized schools that were producing many well-trained specialists' (Participant 18, 76). The same sense of loss of a good education tradition was expressed in all groups. There was a slight generational difference in focus: the older participants expressed their sadness about the system as a whole using the general discourse of 'destroyed by them', while the younger respondents provided a more detailed account of it and also said that even if their education was not that bad, it did not guarantee a good career or any jobs in the sector they were trained for. Interestingly, the older participants had a completely different opinion about the reason behind this, in particular, they used the discourse of blame: 'They have changed, the young people only think about the money, the salaries and not about the realization in the profession they are pursuing' (Participant 18, 76). However, a moment later, the same participant acknowledges that, again, it is not only the young people and their values that are to blame but also the government: 'There are many reasons for this: our bad transition is one, because they did not create the conditions for the kids to develop. They ran across the border to earn money...' (Participant 18, 76)

The younger participants themselves addressed some issues that had to do with financial security and social care and that could potentially make them leave the country in search of financial stability. One of the participants recalled her recent trip to the USA for a *Work&Travel* programme. This story was linked to her reflection on the state of the younger generation in Bulgaria and partially, was used to explain why she felt that *prehoda* affected them negatively:

- The state has no money for pensions... (Participant 5, 23)
- Don't worry. We will not retire at all. (Participant 8, 22)
- I was in the States in the summer, and one night I was in a family. They were celebrating the retirement of the husband. So, he was like: "I am retiring, great! Now I will have time to travel!", he was so happy, so satisfied! (Participant 5, 23)

- Because he didn't have to work anymore! (Participant 8, 22)
- So I looked puzzled, and they asked me - "Okay, in your country what do you do when you retire?" (Participant 5, 23)

All laugh.

- So I said – "You start looking for a job". And they were like "What? Wait a minute!" (Participant 5, 23)

As in the previous section, a certain ambivalence is present in these discussions, in particular demonstrating the intergenerational gap. In this case, the younger people seem to be more confident when discussing the present, while the older participants are often contradicting themselves in trying to explain the reasons behind the difficulties faced by the younger people after the transition. Just as the younger participants had conflicting ideas about the past and its impact on the working class, the older participants had a somewhat blurry understanding of the present embodied by the younger generation. It could be argued that the lack of intergenerational dialogue aggravates this ambivalence. As one of the older participants noted, she had difficulty connecting to the younger people, while another participant complained that her own family very rarely asks her for a piece of advice. While the intergenerational gap has always been present, and is not unique to post-communist condition, it seems important that the participants associate the lack of communication in their families with *prehoda*.

As a result of the worsening of the economic situation and a lack of security and support, the theme of *stress* was also present in all of the discussions. The lost feeling of being more relaxed and living a slower kind of life is contrasted to the pressures of everyday life today:

- Around me, they only feel nostalgic for being more relaxed (Participant 11, 30).
- Yes, I've heard that too (Participant 10, 34).
- Easier, perhaps, slower? (Participant 11, 30)

Referring to the film extract from *The World*, one participant noted that the only real problem that the people on screen are facing is that they cannot find sugar in the shops:



Here, so to speak, in my opinion, the pressure that we are living in now is missing. The only problem that this woman has is that there is a lack of sugar in the shop. Now, we can encounter much more serious problems on any given day... (Participant 2, 28)

As these discussions suggest, the socialist past is described as a period of relative prosperity and order. As it usually appears, the past is also associated with clarity. The feeling of safety is also contrasted with the fragmentation and isolation – the feeling of security is connected to the sense of collective togetherness. The older participants, in particular, described Bulgaria today as ‘empty’ and ‘lifeless’:

Education, health care, the kids ran away (abroad). Bulgaria is deserted - here, every third village (today they said it on TV) is depopulated, there are no people. This is scary. Bulgaria was a paradise. I love Bulgaria a lot, and Bulgaria was recharging me, and now it's a sad sight, Sofia is a sad sight. Sofia is ... it is deserted, empty, there is no life... There was life. Now there is no life there, and everything is still. The kids are not playing outside as they did before, life was just different (Participant 14, 58).

The same respondent was also quite bitter and pessimistic about the future, because, as she described it, ‘one’s sense of homeland, of a family, was destroyed, they destroyed it...’ Speaking about the sense of community and social fragmentation, the transition from an active denial of nostalgia towards acknowledging some benefits of the socialist system was particularly interesting in one of the middle-aged groups. When asked what they thought about the scene in the corner café, the first response was also quite critical, and one participant implied that perhaps these people were sitting in the café in the middle of the day because they did not have a job.

In another group (75+) a participant who was previously particularly defensive about having any sense of nostalgia suggested that such a depiction of a vibrant local community was accurate. However, she also noted that the sense of togetherness and close communal ties were a necessity rather than a choice in a society where censorship, control, and surveillance were omnipresent:

In a closed society, people have sought salvation in friendships, in relationships, in like-minded people who get on well... This was a protection

from the environment. People read a lot, but we had nothing else, we did not have a choice of entertainment. The main focus was on friendships, relationships... (Participant 16, 79)

In another discussion, people pointed out that they felt sad and stressed because they no longer knew their neighbours, they felt isolated and no longer had the same sense of community overall. Similar to the issue with education and employment, the older participants attributed this change to the high competitiveness of the economy and the rise of the materialistic individualistic values:

Social connections were different. I have been living in my building since 1956, I was a kid then, 6-7 years old. We all knew each other, we gathered, played together, the adults were also outside our block, drinking, talking. We were playing until late at night, and we all knew each other. I love these contacts. Now... In our building, young people occupy most of the apartments - believe it or not, I don't know any of them. Some families have been there for five or six years now, and I still don't know them... You know I'm very sociable, and I always find a way to approach someone and talk, but... I can not make contact with these young people (Participant 18, 76).

Thus, the change from the order that was perceived by these respondents as safe, connected and less materialistic, was explained as a result of the economic decline during *prehoda*. The lack of jobs was even mentioned as the direct cause of the social isolation and fragmentation since some people were pressured to leave their hometowns or even the country in order to support their families financially, and yet, this led to the dissolutions of families because of the distance.

One particularly telling example was given by a participant who was specifically critical of the changes after the fall of communism, although she and all her family were 'anti-communist' before the transition. Talking about the sense of community in the screened extract, she notes that this scene would have been impossible today, because of the increasing necessity of economic migration:

They [the government?] made it this way, so there were no jobs in their village. He went to Burgas. There was no job for him there either. So what? The family was broken! One by one, people left abroad. And that's that! The

family was broken! The kids were left to themselves, and they became drug addicts... It is all an avalanche of outrage, of horrors that just make you shiver! (Participant 14, 58).

Then, her recollection became more nostalgic as she compared the past and the present:

But it was different before... In Kazanlak (my father is from there) - the people worked, there was a military factory, there was a manufactory right in the village! People worked there, they went to work in the morning, and they returned home in the evening. There was a people's shop. We were going with my aunt to shop there, they had everything - fabrics, clothes. Downstairs, there was a pub where we bought lemonade, beer... There were people everywhere, there was life! And there is nobody there now! This is scary. They took it all away from us, but not just from us, I think it's a global thing. It is not just here; it is not just in Bulgaria... (Participant 14, 58).

An occurring word in all of the focus groups that was left unexplained by the participants, and is quite difficult to understand is the word 'them'/ 'they'. From the context, it seems to be referring to the Communist Party, to the government, or the greater world powers (USA, NATO, or the EU). This shows that the concepts of 'communism' and 'anticommunism/capitalism' are used interchangeably and with equally pejorative meaning. This resonates with the analysis of the working class attitudes towards the past and the present conveyed at a factory in Sofia by Kofti (2016), who notes that "“communist” and “communism” are often used pejoratively as explanations for the accumulation of power by others, which also implicates inequalities, the obscure acquisition of key positions, and even the implementation of neoliberal work policies' (2016: 78).

For example, in one of the groups, when discussing the way that the transition was conveyed in Bulgaria in the 1990s, one participant notes that the social fragmentation was in the interests of the ruling party ('them'). He suggested that inequality and class differentiation was used as a tool of manipulation and control over the population since it is much easier to 'pit various groups against each other' than to face a consolidated society:

So they said: “oh, [...] we can not control them anymore, so now we will create a division in society. This results in a class division so that there is constant opposition, people are constantly struggling not to be those, at the bottom. But they will actually be the same, and in the meantime, we are just going to continue with our bullshit (Participant 3, 40).

Thus, it is evident that in this group adaptation was not seen as a solution to the problems of the new system. If one was good at adapting, they essentially agreed to risk their wellbeing and happiness. Furthermore, those who were the most ‘adaptable’ were considered by the older participants as morally corrupt:

- Then you could work, the young ones were learning to work, and now... (Participant 20, 78)
- Yes... (Participant 19, 75)
- [they are] Drinking coffees and... (Participant 20, 78)
- Now when they are looking for a job, they want to be paid well, not to work in the profession they have studied for and can develop. Their moral values have changed (Participant 18, 76).
- They have been lost (the values) (Participant 19, 75).

When asked what, in their opinion, caused this change, one participant stated that now ‘Everyone cares only about their prosperity, money, the big salaries. People are hiding inside their shells’ (Participant 18, 76). Furthermore, the elimination of the collectivist values is not, according to one of the participants, limited to the ordinary people – the whole system is corrupt, and everything is motivated only by materialistic values:

- There were also good things. Roads were built on a voluntary basis, by students... (Participant 18, 76)
- Who 100% believed that... (Participant 20, 78)
- That we do it for ourselves, right ... With student brigades, what was their name ... It wasn’t only students... We went ... People went there with the conviction that it was done for the greater good, for the people... (Participant 18, 76)
- They did it for the homeland... (Participant 20, 78)

- For the homeland! And now they can not convince me that all these millionaires do something for the homeland, even the government. They don't do anything for the homeland and the people. (Participant 18, 76)

Here again, the word 'they' is used to describe the, supposedly, privileged group that causes the negative outcomes of *prehoda*. Another aspect that, according to the discussions held in these focus groups, led to even more fragmentation and isolation was the rising inequality and class division after the fall of the regime.

Another version of inequality often mentioned in discussion was the division between Sofia and the provinces. Interestingly, the participants associate the lack of development in these areas with them being stuck in the past. When asked about the extracts and its nostalgic qualities, in two of the groups the participants noted that only people from Sofia could feel nostalgic, because in the rural areas nothing has changed, so they could not feel nostalgia. One participant who only recently moved to Sofia from Stara Zagora, a town in Southern Bulgaria, noted that the way of life pictured in the film is still very much present outside Sofia:

- Until recently I lived in this reality, even five years ago (Participant 1, 25).
- It's very different for me. I've never experienced such a day-to-day life (Participant 2, 28).
- It's because she is from Sofia (Participant 1, 25).

In the focus group in Gorna Oryahovitsa, the participants, however, argued that the social fragmentation and isolation has already 'caught up' with the small towns:

- We are not like Sofia, a big city of blocks... And yet, it happened to us too (Participant 18, 76).
- I was puzzled, years ago, they said that in Sofia they did not know their neighbours (Participant 19, 75).
- I was surprised too, and yet, the same thing happened to us (Participant 18, 76).
- They said it on TV, that there is a big difference in the [...] standard of living (Participant 20, 78).

Thus, they attributed the newly emerged fragmentation to the new inequalities that were previously only characteristic of the capital. Their critique of the differentiation also results in a certain hostility towards those who managed to reach higher levels

in the class hierarchy. The binary black and white approach is, once again, utilised when discussing the social fragmentation, which, according to some of the participants is the direct outcome of the materialist and consumerist values of these people who were capable of adapting:

- Everything is revolving around the money (Participant 13, 75).
- It was not like that before...We were counting our pennies and yet, we were happy (Participant 14, 58).

The theme of the fixation on money and devaluation of everything else is often surfacing in the discussions, as the 'the modest well-being of the past' (Koleva, 2012: 151) is contrasted to the fundamental class division of today. It seems that the participants admit that even under the regime, there were always those who were more privileged, but the common feeling is that it was more controlled and that there was some balance. For example, in one of the focus groups, talking about corruption, the participants agreed that now people have more opportunity to not only gain capital but also they are not afraid to show it. They mention privatisation and the lack of transparency around the whole process during *prehoda* as one particular reason for the furthering of the class division after 1989:

- There are, there are people, a small number of people who are much better now than before (Participant 13, 75).
- Yes, yes... Since under communism there was no opportunity for people to have a lot of money, a lot of capital...To travel (Participant 14, 58).
- Now one family has four cars! (Participant 13, 75).
- Then, even on the top of the party, they were controlled: one is watching the other, the other is watching the third one. No one had a factory. Maybe they had 100 leva... But now, 4 billion in the bank is a completely different thing! People were always stealing and they will steal. But the thing is, there should be some limits (Participant 14, 58).
- Well, now it's all because of privatisation (Participant 13, 75).

As opposed to the relative hopelessness of the younger participant, the older participants who felt more nostalgic, were actually more open to considering the alternatives to the status quo. It seems that by being able to admit both negatives and the positives of the past openly, they were enabled to challenge the current system, mainly by being aware that it is by no means the only possible version of

modernity. Pointing out the aspects that are missing in the present, such as jobs, equality, security, sense of community, the participants express their moral evaluation of the present. It should be noted that both groups mentioned the same aspects of the present, but the younger participants criticised these aspects from the point of view of their present – the domain they felt more authorised to talk about.

It is evident that most of the participants in all age groups do not have an idealised vision of the past, as they are aware of the shortcomings of the past. None of the participants in either age group expressed an apparent desire to go back in time or bring back the regime. Their vision of the present was quite bleak and pessimistic:

In my opinion, people are nostalgic only for having some kind of security, so they are telling me, I don't know. Because they complained that there was not enough information, you generally did not know what was happening beyond the country. The shops were empty; you couldn't buy anything. If you wanted to buy a car – you'd have to wait for a long time. At least you had a job, you always had your annual leave. No matter how hard you worked...

(Participant 11, 30)

I argue that this is a sign of a reflective nostalgia that relates to the present and tells more about the present than about the past. It seems that the contested nature of the communist legacy becomes a starting point of a new negotiation, as it allowed the older participants not only to express themselves more openly, since they had their own first-hand experiences, but also to take a moral stance towards the present. At the same time, as the previous section shows, the younger participants felt less enabled by the nostalgia, since they felt that they did not have the right to experience it.

The critique of social isolation, class fragmentation, consumerism and individualistic materialism was mostly present in the accounts of participants who lived during communism. Interestingly, in one of the younger age groups, two participants expressed the same critique, but were shut down by the rest of the group very fast:

- As for me, when I heard stories about that time, I always thought they may have had nothing, but they were together. That was my conclusion (Participant 11, 30).
- Yes, their relationships were not a commodity... (Participant 10, 34)

The older participants were, in a sense, more able to draw comparisons with the present, but also to imagine some kind of an alternative that goes beyond the binary approach. As the previous section demonstrates, post-communist nostalgia is often perceived as an escapist tendency of those who were less able to adapt to the changing circumstances, and thus, became marginalised. I argue that encountering mediated recollections of the past on screen may enable and justify a discussion that negotiates the shortcomings of the past and the present on a spectrum rather than on the polar binaries. By expressing their critique of the present, the participants were actively engaging in the discussion and challenging the status quo, thus contributing to the argument that nostalgia might enable a mechanism of coming to terms with a past that is active and reflective rather than escapist and regressive. Moreover, as Koleva points out, post-communist nostalgia might also be a way of reclaiming 'ownership of the past' (2012, 431) especially by the marginalised groups, including the older generation and the working class that is often dismissed within the discourse of adaptation.

Referring to the lack of sugar in the screened scene, one participant pointed out that even though now you could find anything you like in the shops anytime, it is neither tasty, nor healthy. They also agreed that sometimes there is so much choice in the shops, that they just cannot choose anything and leave the shop without even making a purchase:

I can leave the store, dressed in salami from the top down, but they have no taste, and I buy cheese every day that does not look like cheese... Inside there is dry milk, palm oil and what not... The meat is screaming: 'buy me!', but it has no taste and it looks like a paste or something, with some fish flavour... I preferred to have two types of salami, but to know that if not one, the other will be delicious. Not that I deny that I want to have everything, but... I don't know what's better, there must be a balance (Participant 18, 76).



## 6.7. Conclusion

Because of the negative attitudes towards the communist past in the public discourse, now it seems inappropriate to be stuck' in the past, while also there is a gap between the understanding of personal memories and the grand collective historical narrative, resulting in the feeling of isolation and estrangement from history. However, there is still a need to relate to the past without being judged as nostalgic in a negative, devaluing way. As this study shows, nostalgia could be potentially considered as a tool of social critique, empowerment, regaining agency and subjectification. Through personal memories, the audiences relate to the grand narrative of history. Consequently, they could also see the shortcomings in the modern conditions of neo-capitalism and challenge the status quo, relating both to the past and to the present through nostalgia.

It is argued that nostalgia, as just one of the multiple ways to relate to the past, is expressing some concerns about the present and exposing the gaps between the concepts of the West and the East, the private and the public, and, more broadly, the two polarised versions of the communist history. Mediated nostalgia, and more specifically, cinematic representations of the past help connect these gaps and make sense of this discontinuity.

In this study, I argue that the existence of some traditional nostalgic tropes is not necessarily a sign of the desire to go back to that times, nor should it automatically be considered as a positive attitude towards the past. As the analysis shows, the representations of the past include accounts of the negative aspects of the past, and the participants in my focus groups clearly stated that a balanced evaluation is required to come to terms with the past. The case study films do not create a monolithic positive or negative image of the past, while the participants of this study have a quite nuanced understanding of the aspects of the communist regime that are better left in the past.

The main themes that were occurring in all focus groups included a loss of a sense of community or togetherness, loss of social ties, isolation, and fragmentation. These losses were generally attributed to the economic factors rather than to the general ideological or cultural shift in the system. Namely, in the discussions, the sense of disconnection and fragmentation was directly linked to the instability, state corruption, unemployment and the subsequent necessity for economic emigration,

not only abroad, but also within the country from the rural to the urban areas. Consumerism was associated with the shift in the value system from a collectivist to an individualistic and a materialistic one. In particular, the older participants felt as if they were left out for being unable, or unwilling, to adapt to the new system.

As the analysis of the discourses of blame and adaptation in this chapter shows, the rising inequality and social fragmentation is met by the desire to find someone to blame. It is not surprising that it is the most vulnerable groups that are being blamed most consistently. The analysis of national identity discourses in the present study suggests that often, the minorities, including the Roma and, more recently, the refugees are constructed and perceived as the Other. However, under neo-capitalism, a broader marginalised category emerged as the internal Other. This group included the working class, the unemployed and the pensioners, who are all blamed for their inability to adapt.

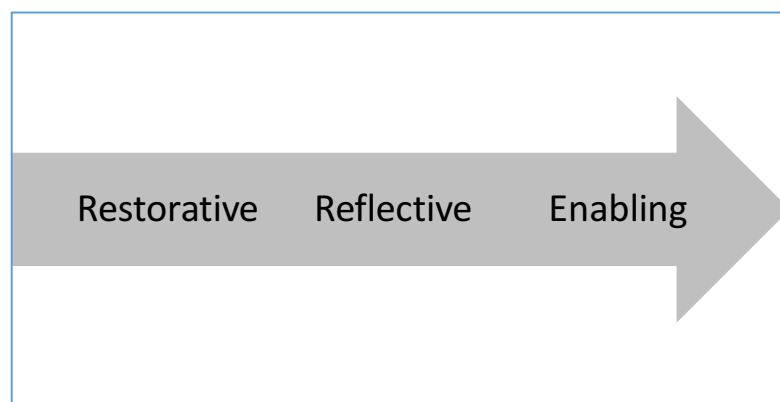
Despite the evident need to justify or even excuse themselves for their nostalgic views, the older respondents in the focus groups suggested another model of a more nostalgic view of the past. Acknowledging that they did not want to bring the regime back, the older participants still admitted feeling nostalgic for some very specific aspects of the past, including the social care and security. Thus, by openly expressing their moral stance towards the present, they were able to imagine an alternative or a more comprehensive viewpoint that challenges the post-1989 binary approach.

The bitterness and hopelessness of the younger people who did not express nostalgia openly should not be dismissed either. I argue that the general pessimism among the younger participants is even more aggravated by the fact that for them nostalgia is perceived as denied, as is any type of a more coherent and multidimensional view of the past. The overwhelming gap between the past and the present is still present in the discussions about the legacies of communism. It seems that cinema and mediated nostalgia can be one of the various informal ways to initiate some bridging between these two realities. Not capable of changing the economic or political situation in Bulgaria, cinema, nevertheless, has the potential of challenging the status quo and facilitating a more open dialogue that links the individual and the collective memories, enabling the subjects of history to regain their agency. Due to the versatility of the moving image and the dynamic nature of cinema, it can, as this study shows, be the first step towards a more inclusive

negotiation about the legacies of communism and contribute to coming to terms with the past.

I argue that nostalgia in media is not restorative or reflective in itself: it is the reaction and action that stems from nostalgia that is important, i.e. the ability to have a constructive dialogue by relating to the past in a meaningful way. This is when nostalgia enables the individuals and collectives to regain their agency in history. At the same time, from the point of view of media memory studies, the acknowledgement of the audience's ability to respond to media representations in unexpected and unpredictable ways challenges the idea of the audience as a passive consumer.

In the context of this study, we need to acknowledge the enabling potential of nostalgia to not only re-establish the lost connection between the past and the present but also to criticise the present and regain the once lost subjective agency in history. We could evaluate nostalgia's potential to restore agency as a process situated on a spectrum from restorative to reflective and enabling.



*Figure 31 – Post-communist nostalgia as a spectrum*

Restorative nostalgia manifests a longing for something in the past, while reflective nostalgia indicates a sense of loss in the present, and enabling nostalgia introduces a critique of the present, creates some continuity and bridges the gap between the past and the present. Enabling nostalgia also has the potential to emancipate and help the individuals regain their subjectivity and agency in history by feeling connected to the past in a meaningful way and taking a moral stance towards the present.

It is difficult to evaluate fully the impact that the given screenings of the clips had on the general process of coming to terms with the past for the participants.

Nevertheless, at least one thing seems certain – the case study films appeared to provide an effective memory point that started a discussion. The discussion itself helped restore some sense of coherence for the participants through critically crystallising their own opinions, transmitting them to the rest of the group and establishing a dialogue with the people with different views.

Along with the importance of the characteristics of the media representations, and the response of the audience, we should also acknowledge the context in which the media is perceived. In the current research, the process of media consumption was significantly different from the usual experience of film-watching at home or in the cinema. Firstly, because it was a small group activity where the ensuing group discussion highlighted the collectiveness of the experience. Even if in the cinema some level of togetherness is achieved by the simple fact that there are other viewers in the theatre, the active collective engagement is not guaranteed. Secondly, the atmosphere of the discussions was more private preconditioned by the location where the focus groups took place – at the participants' or moderator's homes, at their workplace, or on a café terrace. I would suggest that the relaxed and familiar atmosphere was also amplified by the fact that all focus groups were small, which, eventually led to a more open discussion.

Thirdly, the experience of film-watching was not homogenous during the focus groups because the participants only watched one clip from each of the films. Therefore, some of them have seen the whole film, while for others, it was their first glimpse of the film. While such process of cinema viewing is, to some extent, fragmented, there are some benefits to it as well. The collective watching of a selection of clips allowed to even up the participants' experiences and knowledge of Bulgarian cinema and empowered those of them who have never seen a Bulgarian film before, participate in the discussion on equal terms.

Finally, the process of film perception by the audience was significantly affected by the researcher. Not only have I selected clips according to the theme that I wanted to discuss, but I have also mediated the discussions after the film, asking questions and focussing the participants' attention on certain aspects of the film narrative.

The factors mentioned above allowed for a relaxed step-by-step discussion providing enough space to figure out the meaning of nostalgia for the participants

and allowing them to reveal their opinions through personal experience and anecdotal stories. I would argue that facilitating the discussion opened up new possibilities of a more critical perception of the films, as the moderator's questions acted as the connecting bridge between the narratives on screen and encouraged the participants to connect what they have seen on screen with their own experiences and memories, direct or inherited from their parents.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I argued that new Bulgarian cinema about *prehoda* encourages a more meaningful and nuanced engagement with the communist past. By addressing the national identity rebuilding process, the varied manifestations of post-communist nostalgia, and the contested ways of remembering the past, new Bulgarian cinema offers a platform for a dialogue and negotiation. In the absence of consistent official memory policies regarding the fall of the communist regime in Bulgaria, new Bulgarian cinema's role as a mediator of collective memory becomes more significant.

After a period of turmoil during the post-communist transition, Bulgarian cinema is now going through a period of a gradual revival. In terms of its production capacity, Bulgarian cinema continues to be a relatively small industry: it is still regaining its strength after the post-1989 crisis. However, the potential of small local and regional cinemas to resist the hegemony of Hollywood can be achieved with the help both of state film support, and through a variety of regional co-productions. The number of Bulgarian co-productions with other European countries has increased in the past decade, and it is likely that this trend will continue. New films appear regularly and are quite successful both locally and internationally. Most importantly, the interest and demand in local cinema are rising, which highlights the vital role of cinema as a platform for collective memory negotiation.

This thesis used an original multimethod approach combining film analysis with focus groups and in-depth interviews to look beyond the representations of the past and give voice to the audiences who are often neglected or ignored in media memory studies. Film extracts not only facilitated a more open and nuanced discussion but also provided a common ground for the participants. It is suggested that film extracts can be used as a tool of facilitating a discussion, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics when a certain distance and mediation is beneficial. At the same time, the universal appeal of cinema can provide a link between the official and vernacular modes of remembering, relating the participants' personal experiences to the grand historical narrative.

In the context of a virtual lack of official channels for re-evaluating the past, cinema becomes an alternative platform for national identity negotiation. The national negotiation process in Bulgaria could be viewed and analysed through the

postcolonial lens, the discourses of inclusion and exclusion, and the subsequent process of othering. An interesting exchange between the symbolical core, semi-periphery and periphery emerge as a result. On the one hand, cinema encourages, mediates and facilitates the exchange between these symbolical entities. The case study films produce multiple diverse representations of national identity that are not limited or homogenous in their treatment of the Other. Thus, they are providing fertile ground for hybridity and intercultural negotiation in the context of the transition from communism.

On the other hand, the question of whether this is enough to build new solidarities strong enough to challenge the dominant othering discourses remains. In order to have a more balanced and nuanced discussion about the past and its impact on today's Bulgarian national identity, some additional conditions are required. It is important to highlight the crucial role of, firstly, the opportunity to have an open group discussion, and, secondly, the mediation of these discussions. It is also vital to consider the initiatives that are using cinema as a tool for engaging with the public in a broader sense. I have discussed a few examples of such collaborations, such as Sofia Platform and Refugee Ocean, where the non-governmental organisations are using cinema as a starting point, or a common ground, for building new solidarities.

Other inequalities that emerged in the focus groups became most evident in the study of post-communist nostalgia. While the processes of exclusion in the context of national identity are built on the racialization of the Other, the apoliticisation of post-communist nostalgia often suggests the othering of the vulnerable groups that are considered less adaptable in economic terms. The lack of a meaningful engagement with the past due to the discourses of adaptation, blame, and apoliticisation contributes to the delay in the process of coming to terms with the past. Despite that, the findings show that post-communist nostalgia in new Bulgarian cinema about *prehoda* can encourage new ways of thinking about the past, and, therefore, has a critical, and enabling potential.

The incoherent and fragmented knowledge about the past results in a certain lack of agency in history and a sense of hopelessness in the face of radical changes, such as the post-1989 transformation. The sense of fragmentation and lack of agency is manifested in the coexistence of the discourses of continuity and disruption. Cinema mediates these contested manifestations and offers an

alternative through a certain narrativisation of the past. It is, however, crucial, to acknowledge, that cinema's role goes beyond the function of story- and history-telling. Cinema provides a certain level of distancing from the past, allowing audiences to adopt a moral stance towards the past and the present. At the same time, cinema is triggering the process of engaging with the past by enabling a dialogue between the official and vernacular modes of remembering. Historical cinematic representations ultimately encourage a more nuanced and meaningful engagement with the past, combining the benefits of critical distancing from the past and the ability to relate to it by activating the vernacular, personalised, and emotional levels of remembering.

Several roles of cinema emerged in the focus group discussions, some identified by the moderator, and some explicitly noted by the participants. The participants highlighted the role of cinema as a tool of narrativisation of the past. The critical potential of cinema to 'get inside your brain' (Participant 15) also confirms that cinema produces multiple contested responses and thus, challenges the master narrative, and acts as a counter-narrative. The multiplication of the modes of remembering the past reveals the democratic potential of cinema as a tool for negotiation.

As a moderator, I observed several other roles, including emotional sharing and linking the personal experiences to the collective. While personal remembering is always mediated and is always affected by the collective, it seems that explicitly sharing their opinions with the group raised the participants' awareness of their experiences. Another observation is that the participants were sensitive to the memory politics in Bulgarian society. Both older and younger participants were aware of the reasons why their memories might be considered non-legitimate by the others, be it due to their seniority or their lack of experience, which shows that age and generation are significant variables in research on impact of cinema. It is through a careful mediation by the researcher and the films themselves that it became possible to minimise this reticence and self-censorship, or, at least, encourage each participant to speak up, regardless of their age and background.

As mediators of memory, the case study films create a coherent and narrativised image of the past, challenging the sense of fragmentation and disengagement that a lack of lustration has caused. In its turn, the opportunity to discuss the past helps to emancipate the audience and enables them to regain some level of the lost



historical agency. Cinema, thus, emerges as the much needed vernacular mediator of history that is missing from the official discourses about the past.

Furthermore, the cinematic representations analysed in this study suggest a nuanced and multifaceted picture of the past and the subsequent transition. The interviews with the film directors indicate that the memory producers understand the crucial role of cinema and its place in establishing a connection between the past and the present. At the same time, the intention of the filmmakers and the content of the films do not automatically prescribe a critical viewing and response to the ideas challenged on screen. In the focus groups, however, the films helped to fulfil a twofold purpose: that of establishing a missing link between the official and vernacular modes of remembering, and providing a certain 'safety net' for the participants to be able to relate to the past without exposing their vulnerable pasts or sharing traumatic personal memories. These two roles of the cinematic experience provided an effective common ground for a discussion where varied and multiple versions of the past could manifest themselves openly. Through mediation in cinema, the contested visions of the past and the present had the opportunity to come together and propose an alternative to the post-1989 fragmentation and polarisation.

As the current study demonstrates, with a certain encouragement and an extensive discussion, cinema can effectively mediate memories. Thus, cinema can be a bridge restoring the lost sense of coherence and, thus, help make sense of the past through a dialogue and intergenerational exchange. Cinema highlights the ambivalent essence of nostalgia manifested in its ability to contain both positive and negative recollections of both the past and the present. The coexistence of these, usually polarised, characteristics serves as a proof that there is an alternative, less radicalising path in the process of a reconciliation with the past. Thus, cinema's role in mediating memory is more than that of reinstating the obvious nostalgic leanings in a society traumatised by the failures of *prehoda*. Its' role also lies in challenging the status quo by making some of the ambivalences of nostalgia visible.

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